Flexible child care and Australian parents’ work and care decision-making

Jennifer A. Baxter, Kelly Hand and Reem Sweid
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This report uses data collected through an AIFS evaluation of the Child Care Flexibility Trials, which AIFS undertook for the Department of Education (responsibility for Child Care moved to the Department of Social Services in March 2015 and then to the Department of Education and Training in November 2015). The authors are grateful to the department, in particular the team responsible for the Child Care Flexibility Trials, who were a valuable support throughout this project.

The authors would also like to thank the participants who made time to talk to us about their needs for and use of flexible child care, or to provide information about their work, family and child care through the online survey.

Views expressed in this report are those of the individual authors and may not reflect the views of the Australian government, including the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Social Services.
### Acronyms

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIFS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Family Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASD</td>
<td>autism spectrum disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CALD</td>
<td>culturally and linguistically diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCFT</td>
<td>Child Care Flexibility Trials</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECE</td>
<td>early childhood education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECEC</td>
<td>early childhood education and care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FCCS</td>
<td>Flexible Child Care Study</td>
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<tr>
<td>FDC</td>
<td>family day care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HILDA</td>
<td>Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>long day care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>non-government organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSHC or OOSH</td>
<td>outside-school-hours/out-of-school-hours care</td>
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<tr>
<td>SACS</td>
<td>School-Aged Care Survey</td>
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It is commonly stated that there is a need for flexible child care to be available to parents especially for those who work variable or non-standard hours, given the 24/7 nature of today’s labour market. But Australian and international research shows that parents’ decision-making about work and child care is complex and varied. This research report explores how parents make decisions about work and care, especially when faced with shift work or inflexible job conditions.

We ask here, what flexible child care arrangements are families seeking, and are those arrangements available? We further ask what are the barriers to families accessing different models of flexible care? This research draws upon interviews with Australian parents, with many of them working as police or nurses and so directly able to discuss how their child care needs are met in a context of working variable or non-standard hours. This interview data is examined along with some national survey data, and also survey data from parents of children engaged with specific school-aged care services, to include the perspectives of other Australian families.

There were many different stories that emerged from this research. In some families, parents had adapted their work situation to fit the care they had available to them. This included changing work hours to part-time, moving jobs to one that did not involve variable shifts, or even taking a period of time out of employment. Such adjustments were necessary for some parents who knew that they could not find a care solution to otherwise match their work arrangements. Others made adjustments such as these as they wished to prioritise caring for children, at least for a time. Understanding this proved critical to understanding parents’ needs for flexible care, which were actually already met within many families when we spoke with them because of the work adjustments that had been made.

It was also important to understand that many parents valued the ways they could meet their care needs informally, either by arranging their work schedules to cover care needs themselves or calling on the help of extended family, such as grandparents. While such options were not always easy, and not available to all families, informal care was especially valued at “non-standard” times, such as early mornings, overnight or even on weekends. Informal care was often used to supplement formal care options.

Formal care options were used by many families, and centre-based care was seen as particularly desirable for children approaching school age, because of the social and learning opportunities it gave those children. The downside of this type of care was that it usually lacked flexibility, such that parents were not able to vary their times to match varying rosters, and some parents had difficulties with the opening hours their service offered. Shift-working families would nevertheless use centre-based care, often with informal care or their own juggling of work schedules. Family Day Care provided another type of formal care, which could be more flexible than centre-based care and could operate at non-standard hours. While national statistics show this form of care is less often used than centre-based care, the parents in this study who used it, and who had access to flexible care as a result, were very positive about this as a solution to their care needs. Family Day Care was not available to everyone and, indeed, was not always offered with a high degree of flexibility, as educators are able to determine whether they wish to provide overnight or varying hours of care.
With much diversity in terms of need among parents, of central importance was the availability of a range of child care options, so they can choose the care that best suits their needs at a particular time. Parents generally did not feel this to be the case at present and, in particular, had difficulties accessing formal care options that could match varying rosters or be called upon for short periods of care when work hours did not quite align with their available (parental or non-parental) care arrangements.

In terms of the barriers, the lack of availability of care at the times that parents needed it was the greatest barrier. Some parents sought better flexibility in the workplace, as a means of being able to better address their work and care responsibilities.

Beyond this, workplace and family characteristics meant different parents had more or less success in meeting their flexible care needs. Family factors that proved challenging included having a larger family, and having children of both school age and under-school age, whose child care services might have different operating hours. Living away from extended family, or living in areas with more limited care options such as in regional areas also proved challenging for some.

Overall, many parents expressed a wish for improved access to flexible child care, especially for care to match variable shifts and non-standard work hours. However, there remained a lack of certainty about the degree to which formal care options would be taken up by parents who have already found solutions to their care needs through informal care or adjusting their own work patterns. Such solutions were often preferred over formal care by parents, despite being challenging to negotiate or requiring some compromises to incomes, family time or careers.

This research highlights that decision-making about child care is not straightforward but varied. Future development of child care policy, especially that which attends to care at non-standard hours, needs to be done with consideration of the ways in which parents make decisions about work and care, and the value placed on non-formal care solutions as well as that placed on formal care.
Families' use of and need for child care rarely diminishes as an area of policy concern, especially in the context of ensuring there is adequate and high quality care that supports parents' (in particular mothers') employment. Increasingly there is concern that the existing model of formal child care has not kept up with the more flexible and non-standard nature of employment, which means parents need child care outside of the hours of a standard nine-to-five work-week, or need flexible care that can be varied as work hours vary.

This report focuses on the extent to which parents use or need flexible child care, in recognition that the nature of the labour market may be increasing parents' demands for such care. By “flexible” child care, we are concerned with child care that matches work hours that are outside of standard hours or are variable. While interested in parents' access to such care as available through the formal child care system, such as long day care (LDC), outside school hours care (OSHC) or family day care (FDC), this research considers other ways families find flexible child care solutions. We consider how families use informal care, as provided by extended family, friends or neighbours. This type of care is expected to be particularly valuable for families who need flexible care, as this care is generally highly valued by parents (Wheelock & Jones, 2002), especially for young children (Riley & Glass, 2002). Consequently, it is not necessarily used only because of a lack of availability of formal care options. Further, some parents manage their employment with no child care at all, that is, they rely on parent-only care (Baxter, 2013b; Gray, Baxter & Alexander, 2008). As with informal care, for some this may be due to a lack of availability of other options, while for others it may be the preferred care solution, to avoid relying on non-parental child care.

Specifically, this report explores the following questions, using new survey data on this topic:

- What flexible child care arrangements are families seeking, and are those arrangements currently available?
- What are barriers to families accessing different models of flexible care?

The research makes use of data collected for the AIFS evaluation of the Child Care Flexibility Trials. There were a number of components to the trials; each designed to test different ways of delivering flexible child care. Different approaches were trialled within selected sites across Australia, and involved the government working with service providers and key stakeholders, including representatives of police, nurses and paramedics in selected jurisdictions of Australia. The focus of specific trials included:

- flexible care provided through family day care;
- extended hours of operation in long day care settings;
- weekend care in a centre-based setting; and
- school holiday care for older children and for children with special needs.

In addition, coordinated by a national outside school hours care provider, more than 60 action research projects were developed within outside school hours services, with the overall aim being to improve the skills and knowledge of educators, and to identify opportunities to create more flexible and responsive service provision for local communities.
Chapter 1

The AIFS evaluation comprised analyses of parent, service provider and other stakeholder perspectives. This report draws upon the data collected from parents. Specifically, these data include:

- qualitative data, from interviews with a sample of police and nurses, and families at services participating in the Child Care Flexibility Trials; and
- survey data, collected through an online survey from a sample of families using selected outside school hours care services.

More information about these data sources is provided in Section 2. The focus of this report is not on the outcomes of the Child Care Flexibility Trials. However, we refer to the trials inasmuch as parents’ experiences of specific trial projects provide new insights about the delivery of flexible child care. (For an overview of key findings from the evaluation of the Child Care Flexibility Trials, refer to Appendix A and Baxter and Hand (2016)). The interviews and survey data captured broader information about parents’ use of and demand for flexible child care, and it is these data that are the focus of this report.

While not representative of all Australian families, research using these data permits us to begin answering the questions set out above, providing some evidence from which we can speculate on potential implications for all Australian families. Some analyses of nationally representative Australian data are also included to contextualise the findings.

The report contributes to the body of research that explores parents’ decision-making about child care and employment. In particular, our focus on ‘flexible’ child care is situated within a broader literature in which different characteristics or types of child care might be sought by different families. For example, Peyton, Jacobs, O’Brien, and Roy (2001) found that in seeking child care some parents prioritised finding high quality care, while others prioritised practical considerations such as location and hours. Some parents specifically sought centre-based care and others relative care. Johansen, Leibowitz, and Waite (1996) explored the qualities of care that parents favoured, showing that quality is not a unidimensional construct, with parents valuing such characteristics as the educational and developmental attributes of the care provider, the convenience of the care (e.g., location, cost and hours) and knowing the caregivers. Meyers and Jordan (2006) discussed how parent must make trade-offs among their preferred care qualities, in order to accommodate competing demands of earning and care giving. In fact, drawing upon the work of Emlen (see Emlen, 2010, discussed below) they further noted that “parents construct their understanding and tastes for ‘quality’ itself within the context and constraints of their work, family and care alternatives” (p. 61).

Parents are diverse in the qualities of care that they seek, also seeking different characteristics of care for children at different ages (e.g., Boyd, Thorpe, & Tayler, 2010; Johansen et al., 1996; Rose & Elicker, 2008). Some parents may be more constrained in their care options than others. For example, the analyses of care characteristics sought by parents, by Peyton et al. (2001), revealed practical considerations tended to be valued over quality by families with lower incomes and mothers working full-time hours. In addition to income and work hours, other factors that can contribute to parents being more constrained in their child care options include the area of residence (with fewer options potentially in regional areas, especially if family do not live close by) and family size. Demographic factors such as these are typically found to also explain differences in the types of child care used (e.g., De Marco, Grover, Vernon-Feagans, & The Family Life Project Key Investigators, 2009; Johansen et al., 1996; Tang, Coley, & Votruba-Drzal, 2012).

Our data do not allow us to fully explore financial aspects of the care and employment decision-making process, but we will touch on these issues as they emerge. Differences according to other demographic characteristics are also explored, particularly thinking about ages of children, family composition and location.

The availability and characteristics of care, or beliefs about care, may affect parents’ (in particular mothers’) employment decisions (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). This is most often recognised in relation to mothers withdrawing from employment because of child care constraints (e.g., cost or availability) or beliefs about appropriate forms of child care. An extensive body of research has examined how child care factors (in particular, cost) might affect mothers’ employment decisions (see, e.g., Connelly & Kimmel, 2003; Leibowitz, Klerman, & Waite, 1992). In others,
Flexible child care and Australian parents’ work and care decision-making

Introduction

in recognition that decisions about employment and child care use are likely to be made together, parents' work and care characteristics have been modelled jointly (e.g., Connelly & Kimmel, 2003; Kalb & Lee, 2008; Kornstad & Thoresen, 2007; Leibowitz et al., 1992; Powell, 2002; Rammohan & Whelan, 2007). Parents' employment decisions are usually not just about whether or not to work, as they may make choices about employment characteristics, given child care constraints, opportunities or views, perhaps selecting jobs with fewer hours or with hours at certain times of day. This was illustrated by Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999), who gave the example of a new mother who might elect to reduce her work hours from full-time and little schedule control to work part-time after the birth of a child, given a preference to be at home part of the day with her child. This manipulation of parents' environment to align it more closely with parents' beliefs, then allows choices about child care to better align with those beliefs. This is relevant in thinking about parents who work non-standard hours, who in some cases may have selected those jobs or those hours because they have informal or family-based care available to them and that they prefer to use over formal types of child care. Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999) rightly noted, though, that not all parents are able to adjust their environments (work hours or other factors) to match their preferred or available care options.

Much of the research on child care decision-making or use highlights the difficulties faced by parents who work non-standard hours. Some of this research explores child care decision-making or use within low-income families, given concerns that these families might be at greatest risk of having such jobs, yet have fewer resources to purchase high quality care at non-standard (or variable) hours (Henly & Lambert, 2005; Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012). When parents work non-standard hours, families are less likely than other working families to use formal child care (Han, 2004; La Valle, Arthur, Millward, Scott, & Clayden, 2002; Moss, Hill, & Wilson, 2008; Riley & Glass, 2002). In particular, a greater reliance on family-based and informal care providers has been observed for these families. For example, Riley and Glass (2002) found that the care arrangements of 6 month olds were most strongly predicted by mothers' work shifts and work hours, with evening or night shift work by mothers associated with a higher likelihood of using familial care (specifically, a spouse, relative or friend) and longer work hours associated with a greater likelihood of using centre-based care or family day care homes. However, it is not clear to what extent parents' lesser reliance on formal care, in these circumstances, is a consequence of the lack of availability of such options, or a preference by parents (Meyers and Jordan, 2006). In Riley and Glass's (2002) study, parents often considered familial care to be their ideal care arrangement for these 6 month olds, and so a high proportion of families in which mothers worked non-standard hours had care arrangements that matched their ideal arrangement.

A particular problem in relation to child care is that some jobs (such as in the case of the nurses and police we spoke to) not only involve work at non-standard hours, this work also involves variable hours. Bihan and Martin (2004), in describing child care for parents working atypical hours in selected European countries, noted that while work at non-standard hours might be problematic, the care can nevertheless be planned and can therefore be relatively stable. But when work hours change, such planning is not possible, and “the care solution has to be reinvented, often informally, calling on a network of relatives or neighbours” (p. 567). Some parents with such flexible jobs will have some say over their work hours, such that they can attempt to fit their work around the availability of care, but others will not. Parents working flexible hours often have family-based solutions (i.e., sharing the care between parents in couple families), or rely on informal carers (Le Bihan & Martin, 2004). But it is also commonly reported that parents in these circumstances must rely on a mix of formal and informal arrangements, such that their care patterns are complicated, unstable and also unreliable.

Associations between parents' employment—specifically non-standard and variable work hours—and child care are complex, as highlighted in the discussion above. This research report contributes to the literature by providing an in-depth examination of parents' use of and needs for flexible child care in the context of different employment and family circumstances. The main contribution is the qualitative research undertaken using the interviews with parents, although this information is supplemented with the survey data from the school-aged care survey, and also with some national data about child care in Australian families. Qualitative data are particularly useful to help disentangle complexities as are evident in looking at work and care decision-making (Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012). To present findings from this research,
to fully represent parents’ perspectives on flexible child care, we broadened our focus beyond child care decision-making, to capture how child care fits within other aspects of parents’ lives. Emlen (2010) wrote about this, discussing how parents may seek flexibility from different places in order to better meet the demands placed upon them. He discussed flexibility as potentially existing within the workplace, the family or household, as well as within child care arrangements. The data collected through this research reflected this also, and so our presentation of parents’ perspectives follows Emlen’s framework, by presenting analyses in sections for “employment contexts”, “child care” and “family contexts”.

As Emlen (2010) articulated, when parents are lacking flexibility in one area, such as when they lack flexibility in their work hours, they will seek it elsewhere, through their family, child care or both. This is particularly relevant when thinking about the child care needs of parents who work non-standard hours. As will be described in this report using the new survey data, non-standard work hours can allow parents the flexibility to manage their child care needs, and such families are not necessarily seeking different child care arrangements. For others, especially those with little control over their working hours, managing child care is much more of a challenge, and for them, more flexible care might be useful if it could be responsive to their demands for care.

The findings from this research are structured as follows:

- Section 3 explores work contexts in relation to child care issues. As well as considering non-standard and varying work hours, we discuss how child care issues are intertwined with decisions about returning to work, the length of work hours or number of shifts. We discuss parents’ difficulties in managing any extra requirements of their work, such as travel or overtime, and consider how associations between work and child care might vary with differences in the flexibility of working hours, and workplace policies and cultures.

- Section 4 focuses on child care, to describe how “flexible” child care fits within parents’ demands for child care overall. Flexibility in child care is often considered from the perspective of whether care is available outside standard hours (such as early morning, evening, overnight and weekends) or can be changed or booked at short notice. However, we found that other qualities of child care can give parents some flexibility. Parents’ demands for and use of flexible child care are discussed, highlighting the opportunities and challenges associated with different approaches taken.

- Section 5 then turns to family contexts, including how child care options vary according to child as well as family characteristics. In addition to child age, we present some findings related to the circumstances of children with special needs or when children are sick. We further discuss how work and child care options vary in single-parent families, families with little family support and families in regional areas.

- Section 6 synthesises the key learnings about what parents seek to better manage their work and family obligations, with a focus on thinking about flexible child care options.

- A final section concludes, referring the findings back to the key research questions, and drawing out additional key issues arising from this research.
Data collection and methodology

The data used here were captured through interviews and surveys that were designed to answer a range of information about parents’ use of or demand for flexible child care, in the context of other information about their family and employment arrangements. We gathered information from families who had directly engaged with Child Care Flexibility Trial projects, as well as those who had not, such that a diverse set of information about families’ needs for and use of flexible child care was captured.

The two main sources of data drawn upon throughout this report are the Flexible Child Care Study (F CCS) and the School-Aged Care Survey (SACS). Each of these components is described further below. All data collection was approved by the AIFS Ethics Committee, a Human Research Ethics Committee registered with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). We also include some analyses of other Australian data, to contextualise the findings. The key data sources are described below.

2.1 The Flexible Child Care Study

The Flexible Child Care Study (F CCS) comprised 119 qualitative interviews with parents, with potential respondents identified in two ways. One way was through services that had some involvement in the trials. The other was through key stakeholder groups of the Child Care Flexibility Trials, that is, representatives of the police, nurses and paramedics. Each of the recruitment approaches is described below.

Recruitment via the trial sites resulted in a total of 50 parents taking part in interviews. Some of these parents (40) were approached by AIFS interviewers, having been identified by service providers or project managers as expressing interest in or taking part in one of the trial projects and being willing to take part in the research. Others (another 10) volunteered to take part when asked at the end of the School-Aged Care Survey (described below) if they were prepared to be interviewed further about child care.¹

Parents from stakeholder families were invited by email and through staff newsletters to contact AIFS to talk about the ways in which they currently manage working and caring for their children, any barriers they have experienced in achieving their ideal work and care arrangements and ideas about child care options that they would like to have available to them. This recruitment resulted in a total of 69 interviews being undertaken. This included 12 nurses (all females), 56 police officers (29 female, 27 male) and one paramedic (male).

Data collection in the FCCS was done by telephone, with interviews conducted using a semi-structured approach. These interviews covered families’ use of and need for flexible care, and captured information about parents’ employment and family circumstances. Importantly, these interviews probed parents on how their existing care arrangements were working for

¹ A total of 81 parents expressed willingness to participate in another interview. From these, we selected a sample of 20 respondents to undertake qualitative interviews. They were selected to cover a breadth of projects and families with varying needs or use of flexible child care, as identified from their responses to the web survey. We were able to schedule interviews with nine of these parents (plus one provided information to us by email).
them, in order to capture views of how different flexible child care solutions might, in their opinion, better meet their needs. For parents at trial sites, additional questions were asked concerning their engagement (or not) with the aspect of child care being trialled at that site. Once completed, the interviews with parents were then transcribed and analysed thematically to both draw out parents’ views around the key research questions as well as to explore any additional emerging themes.

Characteristics of the FCCS sample are shown in Table B1, Appendix B, disaggregating according to whether families were recruited through trial sites or through stakeholder organisations.

2.2 School-Aged Care Survey

To provide insights on flexible child care use and needs among families with children in school-aged care services, an online survey was developed, referred to as the School-Aged Care Survey (SACS). This survey captured details of parental and family characteristics, child care patterns of all children in the family, and parental satisfaction with various aspects of their care arrangements. There was a focus on parents’ use of or need for different forms of flexible care, such as care outside of standard hours.

To recruit parents for this survey, all project officers of the school-aged care action research projects were asked to forward an invitation email to parents enrolled at their service (refer to Appendix A for more information). Overall, out of 38 projects that were expected to send invitations on to parents, we received complete responses from 260 parents in services attached to 17 of the projects. Further, parents at other school-aged care services involved in the trials were invited to participate in this survey, with a total of 59 parents completing surveys for these projects. This gave a total of 319 respondents.

The survey largely comprised fixed-choice survey questions, enabling us to calculate numbers and percentages responding in particular ways. This has been done throughout the report, where appropriate. None of the estimates from this survey are weighted, as it was impossible to identify the sampling frame, given we had no information about the families that received the invitations to participate in the survey. The survey also included some open-text questions, and we have used parents’ responses to these items to elaborate on some of the survey data, and to reinforce the findings emerging from the FCCS.

The characteristics of the sample are shown in Table B2. Note that this sample is not representative of Australian families with school-aged children, since it has been sourced only from families using child care for their children.

2.3 Other Australian data

To analyse child care patterns from a nationally representative survey of Australian children, we refer to data collected through the ABS Childhood Education and Care Survey. Data collected in 2011 have been presented here. These have been analysed, using the confidentialised unit record file, to show child care patterns by age and mothers’ employment status.

We also refer to some data collected in the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, to explore child care use by mothers’ work schedule.2

Further, various ABS datasets are used in setting out characteristics of employment—they are referred to where presented in Section 3.

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2 The HILDA Project was initiated and is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) and is managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (Melbourne Institute). The findings and views reported here are those of the authors and should not be attributed to either DSS or the Melbourne Institute.
3

Parents’ perspectives on employment

3.1 Introduction

Parents’ work contexts, in conjunction with children’s ages, are key factors in explaining the child care needs of families. This section uses the qualitative and survey data to describe the links between parents’ work contexts and child care, by first looking at how parents’ decision-making about employment is related to their perceptions about or access to child care.

The importance of first considering employment contexts, in order to understand child care demands, was because we found that when parents were describing their employment arrangements they often referred to how these arrangements had been made in consideration of their child care needs and constraints (or beliefs). That is, families had often manipulated their work arrangements to fit with the child care they had available to them. These adjustments to work were often not insignificant changes, with some parents changing jobs or changing to part-time work in order to find a situation that meant their child care could be managed. As a result, families were not all in immediate need of different care arrangements. This, in part, is likely to have contributed to the lower than expected take up of the child care options trialled in the Child Care Flexibility Trials (see Appendix A).

This section, therefore, explores how views about child care or child care opportunities and constraints contribute to the way parents construct and negotiate their employment situations. In particular, findings related to decision-making about mothers’ employment within the context of child care are presented. Decision-making about fathers’ employment is not explored to the same extent, as our findings are consistent with broader statistics for Australia that show it is mothers, and much less often fathers, who adjust their work hours when families have child care needs. Nevertheless, there was considerable evidence that fathers took advantage of their work conditions by varying shifts, using flexibility in start or finish times, or taking time off to participate in the care of children. So while we focus more on maternal employment, we also recognise the role of fathers and their workplaces in this discussion.

We start this section by examining how decisions about maternal employment are related to views about non-parental child care (subsection 3.2), and then how child care concerns factor into decisions about returning to work after a period of leave (subsection 3.3). The next subsections discuss how child care issues feed into parents’ options for particular aspects of work, including work hours (subsection 3.4), work at non-standard times (subsection 3.5), work that involves varying hours (subsection 3.6), work that offers employees flexibility in their hours (subsection 3.7), and other workplace or employment characteristics (subsection 3.8). A summary of this section follows in subsection 3.9.

3.2 Maternal employment decision-making

Feeding into the plans parents make about maternal employment and possible use of non-parental child care are parents’ own values about parental versus non-parental care of young children (Rose & Elicker, 2008). This includes mothers’ and fathers’ views about motherhood and gender roles within the home. Further, mothers, in particular, might be influenced by moral or social expectations regarding what is seen to be “good mothering” (Duncan & Edwards,
The influence of these views will lead some parents to look for ways to care for children that minimises their use of non-parental care, regardless of the quality and flexibility of options available. In the context of the Child Care Flexibility Trials, it is important to note that some parents with particularly strong views about prioritising parental care of children will be more resistant than others to change their employment (or child care use) if it means taking up more non-parental child care, even if offered high quality, flexible care options.

Strong preferences for parental care may lead parents (especially mothers) to withdraw from or curtail employment such that non-parental care is avoided or at least minimised while children are young. This is most commonly seen in families in which mothers leave paid work for a time to care for children, taking a period of leave or other time off work.

In the FCCS, women often talked about taking time off work when children were born. Most had not taken a lengthy period of time off work, but had resumed work while their child was quite young. (The nature of our recruitment strategy may mean that we have not captured those who left work with the intention of prioritising parental care of children for a more extended time.)

We know from wider research that mothers’ engagement in paid work depends not only on views about parental (and non-parental) care of children, but also upon financial and non-financial rewards gained from employment, and opportunities to engage in employment that fits with available or preferred child care arrangements (e.g., Boyd, Walker, & Thorpe, 2013; Hand, 2007). Among employed mothers in the FCCS there were divergent feelings about paid work. Some mothers expressed their enjoyment of work, and so were prepared to deal with the complications of child care in order to keep working. For example:

I actually do enjoy my job and so I have to sacrifice something, and that sacrifice is trying to organise care for the children. And I only work part-time, so it’s not every day. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

For others, work was viewed as a means of meeting financial needs, or just something they felt they had to do. For example:

I’m not interested in career progression or anything like that. I go to work to feed my kids. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Oh, totally, my ideal preference in the ideal world would be to be a stay-at-home mum till she at least started school. And still have her in [child care]—because I think child care plays a very essential role … because they learn very important skills there—but to be definitely a stay-at-home mum for the first few years. But I’m not in that ideal world. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Clearly, preferences and realities of parents do not always align, although parents in the FCCS were generally quite reconciled to the situation when this occurred. For example:

Yes, I think I’d like to just stay at home with the kids. You know, but I can’t, so that’s fine. But I’m quite happy with them doing two days. Like when [child 1] and [child 2] go to school, I’m still going to leave [child 3] in two days a week because it’s working quite well and he’s happy, so I’m happy. I don’t want to change their routine too much if I don’t have to. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

Others in the FCCS talked about feelings of guilt and regretting missed time with their children. Such feelings were reconciled through awareness that children were happy and well cared for by their carers. For example, this mother, working full-time as a manager in retail, said:

It's a big commitment working full-time. And it's also the feeling of guilt that your child is in day care and you're at work, and you always feel that little pang of guilt. But the reality is that we need the second income ... You know, [child]'s happy. I mean in the end all I care about is that she's happy. So it does work for me, it's working OK at the moment ... It works for me as long as she's happy. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Another mother, who was unhappy with the quality of her child's care, said:
Parents’ perspectives on employment

The quality is crap but, like I say, right now I just really tried to come off like not even think about it literally, because I mean it’s just bad. I feel guilty all the time just thinking about it. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

She was asked whether she would feel less guilty if she felt better about the quality, and she replied, “Of course it would, it would make me feel so much less guilty, definitely, make me feel like working even more, you know”.

The availability of high quality, flexible, child care options is likely to be of value in families such as this one. For example, those who were able to access more flexible care through the Child Care Flexibility Trials (particularly the family day care options) did report engaging more with work, or at least finding that they were better able to manage their work and care responsibilities, and that their wellbeing and their children’s wellbeing were improved as a result.

Because decision-making about work and child care will be affected by preferences, constraints and opportunities, decisions by mothers regarding their involvement in paid work will not always appear “rational” in the economic sense of this word. In particular, some families with higher child care costs perceive that they experience little financial gain from the mothers’ employment. For example, this single mother, who is a police officer, stated:

I’ve got friends that I can ask to look after her, people who are training in child care and things like that, to give them experience, but you’re paying them $20–25 an hour. And when you’re looking at 9 hours, you know, it’s not worth working. But I refuse to give up work so—not that work comes first—but I refuse to give up the independence of having that extra money that I need to. Well, it’s really hard. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

The cost of child care was an issue for many families in the FCCS using formal care, although perceptions of affordability varied considerably, depending on what type of care was used, how much was used, and how much the actual costs were relative to income, after taking account of government assistance.

The cost of different care arrangements, in the context of family or maternal income, is likely to be part of the work and care decision-making package for many families, although some families are able to take a loss in income for a time. As cost is only one aspect of child care, in nationally representative surveys (such as the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia [HILDA] survey), when mothers are asked about reasons for not working or not using child care, cost is reported to be a main reason by a minority of parents. Views about parental care of children usually take precedence (Baxter, 2013a; Hand & Baxter, 2013; Nowak, Naude, & Thomas, 2013; see also Duncan & Edwards, 1999; Duncan et al., 2003).

When parents express that they are not working because they prefer to care for their children, in some sense they are expressing that they prefer parent-only care rather than non-parental care. Some parents will have made a conscious decision to avoid non-parental care, based on experience or perceptions of what this would mean for them and their children. The cost of care may be one of the factors considered, as well as difficulties in finding care that suits their expected work hours. Other parents see it as their role to provide this care, particularly while children are young. For these parents, the qualities or availability of non-parental care alternatives may not have been considered at all, as their focus has been on altering their work arrangements to allow children to be cared for entirely by them, or sometimes by their extended family members. (See the discussion and examples of parent-only care for families with employed mothers in Section 4.9.)

Mothers in the FCCS were generally employed and did not often talk about leaving work as an option. Some employed mothers who were experiencing child care difficulties, however, demonstrated how such difficulties can intersect with feelings about parental care and lead them to consider non-employment. For example, a single mother doing shift work as a police officer, who has a complex set of care arrangements, said:

It’s a nightmare. I have nearly quit work four times because obviously raising my daughter comes first over work. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)
One of the parents in the FCCS noted that his wife was about to leave work, as the costs of child care meant it was not worth her working.

In the SACS, 10% of responding mothers were not employed (22 mothers). The average age of the youngest child among these mothers was 6 years, with all having at least one school-aged child. These mothers were asked to indicate (from a list of reasons) their reasons for being not employed. The main selections were “cannot find a job with suitable hours” (10 mothers), “prefer to be at home with children” (9 mothers), “have problems with child care” (4 mothers) and “cannot find a job suitable to skills” (4 mothers). Of the four mothers who said that problems with child care contributed to their not working, two had problems finding child care for a child with a disability, one could not access the after-school-hours care needed, and one reported that there was no child care available for her 13 year old, who was no longer in primary school but was not old enough to look after themselves. While “prefer to care for children” tends to be the predominant reason given for mothers’ non-employment in nationally representative studies, the SACS was not representative of all families, given it was drawn from families already using school-aged care for at least one child. (See Baxter, 2013a and 2013c, for some research on not-employed mothers, including reasons for non-employment.)

The above discussion was included to show some of the factors that affect parents’ decision-making about employment, beyond those specifically related to the availability of flexible child care. For parents (mothers in particular) to engage more in paid work, the availability of child care is likely to be a requirement for some families. But this is one of a number of factors that contribute to parents’ employment outcomes, with others including parents’ views about non-parental care, the financial implications of working and using non-parental care, and the availability of suitable employment.

3.3 The practicalities of returning to work and child care

In many families, decisions about child care and employment are initially faced when contemplating a return to work after the birth of a first child. Australian data show that formal care is not always used at this time. For example, among children aged less than 1 year old in 2011, with a mother employed and back at work, 37% were cared for only by their parents, 49% were in some informal care, and 26% in some formal care (including 12% in both formal and informal care). For 1 year olds with an employed (and back-at-work) mother, 19% were cared for only by their parents, 51% were in some informal care, and 50% in some formal care (including 21% in both formal and informal care).³

Many of the FCCS participants expressed that if they returned to permanent or full-time work and the rotating shift, their child care needs would not easily be met by “standard” LDC or OSHC, given they needed access to care outside of standard hours or required care at varying times to match their shifts patterns. The child care solutions adopted by families are discussed in detail in Section 4. These solutions include sharing the care of children between partners, involving extended family members or friends and, for some families, making use of formal care arrangements.

Because of these expected difficulties, child care arrangements often had to be teamed with parents (usually mothers) changing work arrangements, and in subsection 3.4 we talk about part-time work in this context. In particular, the part-time working arrangement of some nurses and police officers in the FCCS allowed them to have shifts that complemented those of their partner, such that one parent was usually available to care for their child(ren). Such arrangements appeared to be time-limited, and parents talked about the stresses of having to come up with new child care solutions at the end of these periods.

For families who expected to rely on formal child care services upon mothers’ return to work, timing the availability of child care with a return to work can be quite difficult. This was illustrated in the FCCS by this mothers’ example of returning to work in an office job:

³ Estimates derived from 2011 ABS Childhood Education and Care survey confidentialised unit record file. See Baxter (2013d) for figures that show child care by age of child and mothers’ employment status.
I suppose the main problem initially was trying to actually find a place, and trying to fit that in with return to work, because, you know, workplaces have certain requirements to notify them before you return to work. So it’s basically 8 weeks, but the day care centre would only provide 3 week’s notice of a place becoming available. So it sort of meant that you had to pay for day care for 5 weeks before returning to work, without having an income. So that was really quite difficult. And there’s also a bit of a shortage of places as well because I only wanted a part-time place. So trying to fit all that in with work as well, you know, with reaching an agreement for returning to work, was sort of really a bit difficult. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

When asked whether this was just financially stressful, or were there other difficulties, she replied:

It was financial—as far as having to pay for the child care. But I suppose difficult because you don’t know whether there’s a place available. Like, it’s just really short notice and with the size of the waiting lists, you don’t even know if you’ll get offered a place that year or, you know, how long it’s going to take to even get offered a place. So there’s that sort of stress as well, with having no certainty of even having a place. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

One male police officer in the FCCS told us of the difficulties he and his wife had in finding a child care place for their son. His wife was interested in returning to work part-time in retail, but their inability to secure a child care place after looking for 3–4 months meant this had not yet been possible:

No, we’re trying to get child care for the 20-month-old baby … We have our name down at a number of child care facilities at [city]. We’re on a waiting list and we’ve had no correspondence that there’s any vacancies … We’ve paid a fee at a number of places and got our name down on a waiting list to try and get child care. We just only want one or two days a weeks and we’ll be flexible—any day would suit, as long as we could possibly get one or two days. (Father, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

One of the FCCS respondents told us:

When I was pregnant with my child at 10 weeks, I enrolled my unborn child into five different child care centres. Once he was born and I needed to return to work, I was still unable to get him into any of those centres. So I ended up with a newborn in a bouncer under my work desk. (Mother, single parent, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

The nature of the FCCS and SACS samples meant we did not have a large representation of jobless mothers in either study. However, in each, as was apparent for families considering how to manage mothers’ return to work after a period of leave, we found that jobless mothers who were hoping to find work were clearly mindful of the fact that they needed to have or to find child care in order to take up work. For example, a jobless mother in the SACS had booked her child into a day of week of OSHC in preparation for her looking for work.

When families have child care in place for one or more children, they sometimes continue that arrangement even when events change and a parent becomes available to be at home for a period of time. This might occur if a mother takes leave after the birth of a new child, or if either parent loses their job. For example, a mother in the FCCS who had lost her job recently talked about why she did not take her child out of child care, even though this has been financially difficult for her:

Then you’re going to lose your place. So it’s like I’m hoping not to be out of work for too long. So why take him out for four weeks and then try to put him back and you can’t get it. So then what happens is I can’t go to work. So we’re better off keeping him there. It’s great for his social, you know, social aspect and also gives me the full day to actually look for work. (Mother, single parent, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

The above quote and some of the reports of other parents in the FCCS indicated that retaining a place in child care ensures there is a place when it is needed later, gives parents a bit more time for job search activities or being with a newborn, and can be beneficial when children are gaining from that care.
National child care figures likewise show children are often in some child care even when mothers are not employed, and this is especially so when children are at the ages when early childhood education (ECE) is generally seen to be beneficial. (See subsection 4.1).

The practicalities of returning to work and child care issues were most apparent in this research in families who had engaged with (or considered engaging with) FDC through the trials. Some families indicated that they were made aware of FDC as a result of the trials, providing them with an additional option that they may not have otherwise considered.

3.4 Work hours

While some mothers respond to concerns about non-parental care of children and a preference to prioritise parental care by withdrawing from work altogether, others are able to schedule their paid work in a way that allows them time for their children. Some mothers return to work gradually, perhaps starting with shorter hours to maintain greater time caring for young children and to accommodate breastfeeding, or perhaps because of limitations in the availability of child care. For example, from the FCCS, this nurse’s gradual return to work involved set hours and shifts, which meant she could initially use extended family to care for their child:

[My partner’s] parents live here, so up until she was 18 months old—I didn’t go back to work until she was 12 months old and then I went back at reduced hours and I only worked nights and evening shifts so that she was only needing to go to the grandparents for a couple of hours here and there. So … I would drop her off on my way to the late shift and [my partner] would pick her up on his way home so she was only there normally for about 3 hours with them. (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

This mother seemed to view this arrangement positively, as it minimised the time their child was in some non-parental care. In contrast, another nurse in the FCCS had been somewhat constrained by the lack of availability in child care, although was also able to rely on her child’s grandparents to share the care. She hoped to increase her child’s time in child care and therefore her work hours in the future:

My husband’s parents live in the same suburb as us so they don’t live too far away. So my son goes to day care one day a week on a Friday because that’s all we can get him in for at the moment (the places are very limited), and she looks after him the other two shifts I’m at work … I think next year there’ll be a place available so he can go two days a week to day care, and then I will pick up an extra shift a week as well, because my mother-in-law wants to have him for the [other] two days, which is good. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Just as perceptions of child care quality can affect mothers’ decisions and feelings about returning to work (discussed in subsection 3.2), they can affect decisions about work hours. This mother, with a child in school-aged care that she rated very highly in terms of quality, said:

I have no guilt or emotional issues about leaving my child at before- and after-school care, because I know that in some cases the educational outcomes that he’s achieving there are perhaps more varied and extensive than what he would be receiving at home. So I’m more than happy and, yes, it has, I suppose, encouraged me to return to the workplace in a full-time capacity. (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

Mothers’ work hours may be constrained by the inability to find child care for non-standard work hours or for longer hours at work. Conversely, access to child care that supports this work may enable mothers (or fathers) to work longer hours. Respondents in the FCCS who had accessed FDC through the trials talked about how this allowed them to take up the shifts they wanted to do or to increase their involvement in paid work. For example:

Well, with the flexible child care, the extended hours and so forth, it allows me to work full-time, instead of part-time. So it allows me the best of both worlds. I can work full-time, which means more money coming in. And the flexible day care means that, you know, I don’t have to worry about what shift I do. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

When asked whether FDC, accessed through the trials, had helped, this single mother says:
Of course, I mean if I didn't come from a day care, then I wouldn't be doing the afternoon shifts at all. And then probably I will be, you know, in a position where I have to either quit my job, because I can't work enough, you see. So having the family day care has been a big help because he doesn't go there every day, but on days that I have to work, he goes there, so that's helping to maintain that balance between work and home, looking after him. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

Mothers may also be constrained in their work hours because they have a reluctance for children to be in child care for longer than necessary. This might be especially so if child care is not judged to be a high quality substitute for parental care. Where parents feel they have access to high quality care, they are likely to report that their children are happy, and to report satisfaction with their work and care balance. (See discussion in subsection 4.3, as well as the analyses following.)

Among the FCCS families who had successfully been matched to an FDC educator as part of the trials, this meant a positive change in relation to work–family balance. This seemed to be most keenly felt by those who had changed to FDC from arrangements that had previously not been working well. For parents, the two main positive effects were in relation to parents' engagement in paid work and management of their work–family responsibilities and associated stresses. Those new to child care also appreciated how well their arrangements were working.

It is quite common for mothers in Australia to work part-time hours upon return to work. Baxter (2013d), using 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data, reported that of mothers with a child aged under 1 year old, 6% worked full-time hours and 16% worked part-time hours, with the rest being on leave or otherwise not employed. For mothers with a 1 year old, 14% were employed full-time hours and 36% employed part-time hours. As children grow older, mothers are more likely to work full-time hours, although part-time work remains very common such that among all mothers with a child aged less than 18 years old, 36% worked part-time hours and 25% full-time hours. Among employed mothers who were at work (i.e., not on leave), 59% worked part-time hours and 41% full-time.

Among female respondents in the SACS, 46% of employed mothers worked part-time and 54% full-time. The higher rate of full-time work in this survey reflects that this sample was drawn from those using OSHC services, and families with full-time working mothers more often use these services than do families of part-time employed or not-employed mothers (Hand & Baxter, 2013).

About one-quarter of the mothers in the SACS working part-time hours preferred to work more hours. Most commonly, mothers said they were not working more hours because they could not get extra hours in their present job or they could not manage both extra hours of work and their other responsibilities. Some mothers said they were not working their ideal hours because they could not find another job with the hours they wanted, or they had problems with child care. Looking specifically at the child care reasons given, one female respondent in the SACS, who worked casually on weekends, said she would like to work more hours but had problems with the availability of care for two children, and also had problems with the costs of care:

Coordinating getting the same days of long day care for the youngest two and OSHC for the eldest. Cost of child care makes it not worth working except on weekends, when my husband looks after the children. (Mother, single parent, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

One other parent who responded to the SACS mentioned costs as a child care problem. Another preferred their child was not in any more child care than currently used, and another reported their children didn’t enjoy after-school care, so they had them attend only one day per week. Two parents reported having difficulties with child care for children with special needs:

My child with a disability is unable to attend an after-school program for children with an intellectual disability until he is 12 years of age, due to the current funding criteria. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

My 10-year-old child is not eligible for after-school care. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)
Another two had difficulties managing their care arrangements along with work, such that their work options were constrained:

- Expensive long day care for infant, with pick-up and drop-off times between school hours, leaves 4 hours’ daytime work available. Also, other parent works full-time. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

- Daughter in long preschool care, which isn’t late enough for a normal 9–5 job. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

From the FCCS, this was similar to the experience of a nurse who reduced her work hours because their family wasn’t managing when she worked longer hours. As she noted, she would actually prefer to work longer hours:

- I would like to go back to the four shifts I was doing. I was doing four shifts a fortnight and I had to drop down to three because we couldn't juggle. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

In the FCCS we also heard from some mothers who had returned to work full-time because part-time work was not available to them in their job or if they wanted to continue their career. For example, this mother returned to full-time work when her daughter was 6 months old:

- If I wanted this position—which I did, because I wanted to continue my career—then I needed to be there on a full-time basis. I made the decision to go back full-time. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Part-time work was common in the FCCS, with a majority of female respondents (and partners of male respondents) being employed part-time. Many referred to a “part-time work arrangement” that allowed them to work shifts that complemented their husband’s. As many shift-working parents referred to significant problems in being able to access suitable child care for their changeable shift patterns, working complementary shifts in this way was the only way they were able to sustain employment (see subsection 5.8).

For some families in the FCCS, especially those with younger children, reduced hours meant children could be in non-parental care for less time, and this was a key reason for their working shorter hours. For example:

- We want to be her primary caregivers, so I don’t want her in day care any more than 2 days a week, really. We change our life around that. We had her so we would look after her, not let someone raise her for us, so it's only really to cover the times that we have to, you know, work … Like, we just don’t want other people to raise her. We'd rather raise her. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

This family also had an added complication that their daughter was picking up a lot of illnesses through participation in day care, and they were concerned that she would be sick all of the time if she was in child care for more days per week.

There were no instances in the FCCS of fathers working part-time hours to minimise non-parental care. There was a family, though, in which the husband had previously been unable to get full-time work because child care was not available, and his work hours had to be limited to those hours his wife was home. This family gained access to FDC through the trials, and this involvement meant he could increase his hours to full-time. Further, the mother could engage more easily with work, staying late to finish her work if needed, and more easily manage her on-call shifts. This was viewed very positively within their family.

Through the FCCS fathers were often portrayed (by themselves or their spouse) as active participants in child care, taking turns to care for children according to each parents’ work schedules. For example, one mother, a customs officer, referred to her husband’s use of his shifts (as a full-time police officer) to take part in their child’s care:

- When I was working, he tried to work the day off around my shifts so he could maybe mind our daughter. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

The recognition of the importance and value of father-provided care is consistent with research on “ideal” care providers, which reveals that fathers are often considered to be the best option for child care when mothers are not available (Riley & Glass, 2002).
With part-time work often seen to be helpful to parents in managing their child care arrangements, it is not surprising that among families with parents working full-time hours, we also heard in the FCCS and the SACS of some of the difficulties faced when working long hours. In particular, long work hours were difficult if they involved an early start and/or a late finish, for which child care options might be limited. (See subsection 3.5 on working at particular times of day.)

The stress and difficulties associated with managing child care in a family in which the mother works long hours is evident in the following quote from the SACS. This is in response to the question that asked whether there was anything particular about her employment that made managing child care difficult or easy. She referred to the difficult aspects:

The times when I need to make teleconference calls: 6–7 am in the morning or late evenings, 11 pm. Also, travelling to drop my son off in the mornings at my mum’s (three times a week) makes me leave home really early so I can get to work on time. It’s not fair on the kids as they get home late, and by the time we do dinner/homework/bath then to bed, they don’t get to go to sleep till 8–8.30 pm, and they need to be up at 6–6.30 am. [There’s] too much pressure on families. We don’t get to enjoy each other. Everything is a rush and we become robots as we seem to always fight against time. On the weekend we need to do the household activities and get ready for another week, so it makes it hard to arrange any family activities, and kids need our attention and love. We just seem to be in routine and so focus is getting the jobs done, [and] we don’t have enough time for each other. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

While work hours are typically measured on a weekly basis, and comparisons made between full-time and part-time workers, the FCCS revealed that an important dimension in terms of child care was the length of a single shift. A number of the respondents in the FCCS worked rotating 12-hour shifts. Others worked rotating 10- or 8-hour shifts. The duration of shifts vary with occupation and workplace, but with little flexibility in being able to work other than the shift designated.

Finding appropriate child care that covers a 12-hour shift, plus time to get to and from work, proved impossible for a number of FCCS respondents, especially since those shifts were not fixed from one week to the next, and started and/or finished outside the operating hours of child care centres (see also subsection 5.5).

One nurse, an FCCS participant, talked about how the hours of the child care centre she used for her younger son would not work if she still had a job with 12-hour shifts. She had changed to a job with set 8-hours shifts:

It’s a longer day [facility], but it’s still only open from 6.30 till 6.30. So … like it’s still not suitable for the 12-hour shift, but because I’m doing the [other] job, it’s for five 8-hour set days a fortnight. So I can book him in for set days now. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Another mother in the FCCS, a police officer, had a part-time work arrangement to work shifts that complemented her husband’s full-time police work. Neither of their children were in any child care. As the shifts were 12 hours in duration, she had not been able to fit more shifts into her week with this arrangement:

I would like, financially, at this stage if I could work more, because we are really struggling financially. But I can’t pick up any more shifts because I struggle to get my 12-hour shifts in around my husband, let alone any more, and it would just completely take out any time that we have as a family. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Along with the duration of shifts, the times at which each shift starts and finishes varies across different workplaces, as discovered by this police officer who transferred to a regional police station:

This is the first station I’ve ever had that does a six till two and not seven till three. So that was another thing that I wasn’t aware of, and once a transfer’s through, you can’t pull out of it. So that poses its own problems. If it was a seven till three shift at that station, then day or child care centres can accommodate that. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)
However, she also realised that regardless of the hours of the day shift, the nature of a rotating roster meant there were going to be challenges anyway:

“But then you’re not going to get an agreement where work’s going to give me all day shifts. That’s not fair on everybody else who works there. Because they’re going to want me to do afternoons and things like that. So then your day care centre shuts at six; you’ve got four and a half hours you’ve got to find someone.” (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

### 3.5 Non-standard work hours

A key factor relating to possible demand for flexible child care is the degree to which workers’ jobs involve non-standard hours of employment. Here, we consider non-standard hours to involve work in the early morning, evening, overnight or on weekends, and explore how these work hours might cause challenges for families in how they manage child care. (We discuss how they manage child care in Section 4.) Some nationally representative data on women’s employment has been presented here along with findings from the FCCS and SACS, to provide some context to this research. We have not provided similar data for men or fathers, but of course their employment arrangements are likely to also matter to the way in which parents are able to organise the sharing of children’s care.

According to the 2012 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Working Time Arrangements survey, 6% of female employees usually worked the majority of their working hours between 7 pm and 7 am in all jobs.\(^4\) In the 2006 Working Time Arrangements survey, the information provided was slightly different, reporting on the percentage who usually worked any hours between 7 pm and 7 am, and this figure was 25% for female employees who held a single job.\(^5\)

To explore this in more detail, we used data from the 2006 ABS Time Use Survey.\(^6\) Looking at weekdays on which women reported doing some employment, Table 1 shows the percentage in employment at some time during standard hours (between 7 am and 7 pm) and non-standard hours (between 7 pm and midnight and/or between midnight and 7 am), and also according to the location of the work (at home or away from home). As work across one day can span multiple locations and times, women could be classified as working in one or more of these time slots, and one or both of the locations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Location and timing of employment among women aged 25–54 years working on a weekday, 2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 am to 7 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsewhere</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Does not include work-related commuting.
Source: ABS 2006 Time Use Survey confidentialised unit record file

Overall, for women aged 25–54 years, 26% of weekday work involved some work during non-standard hours, with 19% of weekdays including work between 7 pm and midnight and 9% between midnight and 7 am. Most of those working in the morning did so away from home, while evening work was quite often done at home.

With respect to who was doing this non-standard work, the percentage of mothers working non-standard hours (23%) was just less than the percentage for all women aged 25–54 years.

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\(^4\) Table 2, ABS, 6342.0, Working Time Arrangements, Australia, November 2012.

\(^5\) Table 9, ABS, 6342.0, Working Time Arrangements, Australia, November 2006.

\(^6\) Estimates were derived from ABS 4152.0.55.002 - Microdata: Time Use Survey, Expanded Confidentialised Unit Record File, Australia, 2006.
Partnered mothers were a little more likely than single mothers to work non-standard hours (24% compared to 21%). Mothers with children aged under 5 years were more likely to work non-standard hours (31%) compared to those with children aged 5–11 years (19%).

Among women aged 25–54 years who worked on weekdays, differences by occupation reveal that non-standard work was more likely for those employed as machinery operators or labourers (52% worked some non-standard hours on weekdays), and community and personal service workers (35%). It was least likely for clerical and administrative service workers (14%). See Table C1 for these occupational data, and the same data by broad industry groups.

For many of the FCCS police and nurse respondents, working shifts was something they were familiar with, with shifts commonly covering early mornings, afternoons, evenings, nights and weekends. Clearly, these shifts required parents to find solutions to their child care needs. Some parents intentionally sought out certain shifts that could more easily be managed. Some avoided certain shifts that were incompatible with their care arrangements, or incompatible with their views about family time and what was best for children’s wellbeing.

This quote, from a shift-working nurse in the FCCS, illustrates how shift work can sometimes be good, sometimes difficult, with respect to the times of day it allowed her to be there for her children:

> Shift work has its bad points, working all over the place, but then it's good too, you know—on an afternoon shift, when I'm still home to drop [child 1] off at school in the morning and have a play with [child 2] in the morning before I go to work in the afternoon. But then I'm not home for bedtime and dinnertime and all that sort of thing either. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Looking at parents’ references to working at specific times of day, evenings were seen by some parents in the FCCS as being a time that children should be with their parents. One nurse, a single mother, noted she did not work evenings because she did not have child care, but then, when asked whether she would think about evening work, said:

> I wouldn’t entertain it because I've got him on my own, and I just feel I need to be there for my son and doing his homework. (Mother, single, school-aged child only)

She went on to say it would take a lot of trust, having someone else look after her child at night.

Another nurse, working part-time hours and generally working morning shifts, when asked if she would consider doing afternoon or evening shifts, said:

> I'm happy not doing them because I don’t want her in care over dinnertime, bedtime … I don't want her to be out of bed at 8.00–8.30 at night and then pick her up and have to bring her home and put her to bed … I guess it works for our family routine really. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Early morning shifts (or early starts in non-shift work) appeared to be difficult for some families, requiring juggling between partners or with another informal care provider (such as a grandparent) prior to the opening of child care centres or school. For example, this partnered nurse in the FCCS with one school-aged child and one younger child said:

> But the biggest problem I find is that when I’m on a morning shift at work I start at 6.30 in the morning and the day care doesn’t open till 6.30 in the morning. So I either have to wake the kids up earlier to drop them off at my mother-in-law’s and she then takes them to day care and school, or they need to stay over at her house the night before. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Her husband also started work at 6 am so was generally not available to take the children to day care. Reliance on partners and extended family members in this way for morning shifts was quite common among FCCS respondents.

Among nurses and police in the FCCS there were different shift patterns, depending upon the place of employment. For example, some talked about 8-hour rotating shifts that started at 7 am, while others started at 6 am. For those with younger children, the specific start time made a difference to the feasibility of placing children in child care before the start of a shift:
It opens at 6, but I have to be on shift at 6 o'clock. So you know, there's no way to get her into child care and get to work on time. And then if you do an afternoon shift, well, day care centres shut at 6 pm and I work through till 10 pm. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

One nurse, mother to a 15 month old, started at 7 am on the days she worked day shifts. Their family used a child care centre that opened at 6.30 am each day. She said:

Yes, and I’m only fortunate because my day care is next to the hospital and that half hour is just enough time for me to drop him off and just find a car park and get into work. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Morning hours were often reported to be difficult by both FCCS and SACS respondents. For example:

Lack of morning child care and cost has made me change my standard hours, as I can’t start at 8.30 with everyone else. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

I really should be at work earlier than I am, but no before-school care offered at our OOSH … I need to take children with me to early morning meetings. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

We heard from a police officer in the FCCS that when there is no other way of juggling child care arrangements between the rosters of two shift-working parents, they can sometimes negotiate a “delayed start”, to commence (and subsequently finish) their shift at a somewhat later time than others.

When asked about night work and the possible use of child care overnight, there were quite mixed views in the FCCS. Some felt strongly that children should be with parents or in their own home overnight, while others felt this was a time that others could readily take over the care. For example:

I don’t want to put [child] somewhere overnight. I just think that’s not normal. Even though they’re all approved, being family day care people, you just never know what can happen. You just feel safer with them in your own home, especially at night. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

I mean, staying overnight is not necessarily much different to them having their daytime sleeps at day care, I don’t believe. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

The above respondent noted, however, that if children were in child care somewhere at night time (but not overnight), it would be important to establish a pick-up time that did not disturb their sleep patterns. Parents in the FCCS often reported concerns over the effects of their shift work on children’s daily rhythms and sleep patterns. This was most often in the context of waking children very early in the morning to take them to someone else’s house or to child care. Parents were also concerned about the instability of children’s lives, having different carers, or having arrangements changing from day-to-day (discussed in subsection 3.6).

When parents in the SACS were asked about the nature of their actual and preferred work schedule, several noted that their preference would be to work within school hours, or to work hours that more easily allowed them to do school pick-ups or drop-offs. Some examples of preferred schedules were:

Shorter hours, so I could collect my son from school earlier. 9 till 4. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

Starting later (say 9.30 or 10 am) and working back later, so that I can drop my kids at school. Not allowed a later start at my job. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

Interestingly, preferred hours of parents of school-aged children were not always within school hours, no doubt because in some couple families, it would have been easier for parents to share the care of their children if they were working different hours. For example, one mother’s preferred hours were:
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4 pm to 10–11 pm. This way I can drop the kids off to school and pick them up and be more involved in their school. This also reduces the child care before-/after-school care fees. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

In the FCCS, nurses and police who were parents of school-aged children did not talk about fitting their work hours around children’s school times so much, although there was some indication of an aspiration to do this:

If I had the perfect situation, I guess I would prefer to work school hours only or even just, you know, like half an hour before and after, because by the time the kids, you know, walk into school and whatnot, you know, you’ve got that half an hour leeway I guess. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

More often, it was simply the juggle of having work hours that suited their husband’s work hours (if applicable) along with any other child care arrangements. If children were school-aged, then school hours were clearly a consideration.

Across the FCCS and SACS, the practicalities of getting children to and from care or school were added complications in some families, that sometimes had an effect on parents’ work arrangements, requiring parents to make use of flexibility in start or finish times. For example, one FCCS family with three children (one under school age), a part-time employed nurse and full-time employed trades worker, had made use of the early opening at LDC as part of the trials. As stated by the mother:

Before the trial started, my husband was dropping all three of them off, but it was making him very, very late for work. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Another aspect of non-standard work is weekend work, which can be problematic, since most formal child care is only available on weekdays. According to the 2008 ABS Forms of Employment Survey, among all employed women, 32% sometimes worked on weekends (2% weekends only and 30% weekdays and weekends). The percentage is a little lower if we focus only on mothers with children aged under 15 years, with 26% sometimes working weekends.

Among employed women, not surprisingly, working weekends is most likely for those working in sales jobs (57%). It is also relatively common for those employed as technicians and trades workers (49%), and community and personal service workers (45%). By industry of employment, working weekends is common among those working in accommodation and food services (69%), retail trade (55%), and arts and recreation services (59%). Table C2 shows these data for employed women, for all occupations, and Table C3 shows these data for all industries.

Respondents in the FCCS very often worked weekends. The nature of nursing and police work meant this was the norm for many of them. As one police officer, a single mother, noted, it is not easy to avoid working weekends:

Like, you can’t just have weekends off all the time, and you can’t sort of take the easy shifts out. Rightly so, it annoys other team members if you get the good shifts all the time. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

Some mothers and fathers sought weekend work if it meant a partner was available to care for children at the time. However, single parents in the FCCS often reported that weekend shifts were difficult, given the lack of child care (and partner) to care for children at this time. Some were able to make this work if children were with their other parent on weekends.

Within the SACS, half the respondents said they sometimes worked on weekends. This was made up of 28% of respondents who only or mostly worked at home on weekends and 22% who usually worked away from home. However, the majority of these respondents said they did not use child care for work reasons on the weekend. Of those who said they only or mostly worked at home on weekends, 12% said they sometimes used child care on weekends, and of those who worked away from home on weekends, 16% said they sometimes used child care.

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7 Estimates derived from ABS, 6202.0.30.007 - Microdata: Labour Force Survey and Forms of Employment Survey, Basic and Expanded CURF, Australia, November 2008. The overall estimates of weekend work were the same in the 2012 ABS Forms of Employment survey (see Table 5, ABS, 6359.0, Forms of Employment, Australia, November 2012).
care. This gave a total of 24 families in the sample who said they sometimes used work-related child care on the weekends. The most commonly used sources of weekend child care were grandparents (12 families), another adult relative (8 families), a friend or neighbour (7 families), a parent living elsewhere (6 families), and a nanny (5 families). Another nine families selected “someone else”, while smaller numbers used FDC, other organised care or a sibling.

One SACS respondent, a single mother with an 8 year old, had a work schedule that included weekend work. She worked in a lower status job, in a casual position. She preferred not to work weekends because of lack of access to child care on these days:

No child care on weekends or public holidays is a huge problem, as I work those days.
(Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

In general, within the FCCS, parents often reported trying to use their non-standard hours to give them family time that they thought they would not have if they were working more standard hours. For some, this was because the penalty rates associated with non-standard hours meant they could work fewer hours when their children were sleeping anyway, freeing up time to spend with them at other times.

Among parents in the FCCS who juggled their work hours to share the care of children, there was sometimes a sense of having insufficient time together as a family. However, the shifts these parents worked could also give them days at a time when they were both not working, providing opportunities for shared time together. Or, for some parents, their shift work meant that they were home with their children at times that they would not be were they working in a standard 9 to 5 job.

3.6 Variable hours (irregular or rotating rosters)

Another important factor for parents planning child care is the extent to which their working hours change at short notice. Many of the respondents in the FCCS worked irregular or rotating rosters in which work hours could be highly unpredictable.

In the 2008 ABS Forms of Employment Survey, 36% of the employed women had hours that varied or were usually on standby or on call. The percentage was 35% for female employees and higher for female employers and own-account (self-employed) workers (55%). If calculated just for mothers with children aged under 15 years, the percentages were virtually the same (38% of employed mothers overall, 35% for employees, and 57% for employers and own-account workers). Among mothers, there were no marked differences according to the mothers’ relationship status.

Very marked differences were apparent by occupation (Table C2). For example, among all employed women, relatively high percentages with variable hours (including being on call or standby) were found for those employed as managers (52%), community and personal service workers (45%), labourers (42%) and sales workers (40%), with relatively low percentages for those employed as clerical and administrative workers (25%), machinery operators and drivers (27%).

Similarly, there were marked differences by industry of employment (Table C3). For the most common industry groups that women were employed in, the percentages having variable hours (or being on call) were working in health care and social assistance (39%), retail trade (39%), education and training (27%), and accommodation and food services (53%).

According to the ABS Working Time Arrangements Survey (2012), a similar percentage of employed women (33%) had hours that varied or they were required to be on call or standby. Elaborating on how far ahead of time women knew their advance work schedule, 3% knew their schedule less than one day ahead, 4% had notice of one day to less than one week, 7% had notice of one week to less than two weeks, 16% had more notice, and 11% had arrangements

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8 These figures are derived from the 2008 ABS Forms of Employment Survey confidentialised unit record file <www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6202.0.30.007>.
that varied. For those who rely upon non-parental child care, it might be particularly difficult for those with little notice of their hours to manage their care arrangements.

Many nurses and police officers in the FCCS worked a rotating roster, with work hours varying from day-to-day and/or week-to-week or month-to-month. The specific arrangements varied a great deal across the sample. Some worked completely variable hours. Others had one or two fixed shifts, with other shifts varying. Also, some had a part-time work arrangement that not only involved reduced hours, it also allowed them to have a set shift pattern, rather than the rotating shift that was generally a condition of working full-time. Some mothers elected for this arrangement more for the stability of the hours than the reduced hours. The loss of income associated with part-time work was a challenge for a number of mothers, and some regretted that this involved a change in the type of work they could do. For example, one police officer in the FCCS had a part-time work arrangement to give her more stability in hours, even though it meant a cut in pay and a move from work that she loved doing:

I've been in the job 18 years, but “on the truck” front line for 16 years doing shift-work. And that's what I love doing, but I've had to compromise and I've had to think of my son and stableness for him, and that's why I'm doing the non-shift-work role now. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

Another FCCS respondent, also a female police officer, similarly had a part-time work arrangement so that she could set her hours. This was especially important to her, as her ability to organise child care was complicated by a commute of two hours each way from home to her workplace:

And that's what I said time and time again: the reason I work part-time shifts is so that I can have some control over when my shift starts, you know. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

Similarly, another FCCS respondent, a nurse, noted that to avoid working night shifts she would have to be employed as a casual instead. This would cause new stresses, as the uncertainty of what shifts she would be able to get would translate into uncertainty in income:

If I went casual I wouldn't have to do the night shifts. I'd be able to pick what shifts I'd do. But again, it's that lack of stability of finances coming in. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Having flexibility through a part-time work arrangement to align work hours with that of their partner was crucial for many FCCS families, who said they would not be able to manage without it. One female police officer, with a husband working full-time as a police officer, was able to set her shifts in this way. She was asked if she would change jobs if she no longer had this option of flexible work hours, and said:

Yes, absolutely, I would … The kids are my priority. I'm a mother first and a cop second. So if it gets to a point where they're not going to allow that to happen, then I will one hundred per cent look elsewhere. I'm not interested in career progression or anything like that. I go to work to feed my kids. So if they're not going to allow my family to function as a family then I have no hesitation in looking at other options. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

One nurse changed jobs to avoid the difficulties that she would have faced in her original position:

I had to leave [specific ward] because they would only allow me to do 12-hour shifts and they weren't very family-friendly with their rostering. They'd give me a lot of weekends, and I had nowhere to put the kids on the weekends. I was just relying on a family member plus a day care mum—she wasn't always available. If child care [had] extended past six o'clock in the evening, it would've been a bit easier for me because my shifts didn't finish until 7.30. I'm now working in [different ward], purely because they're family-friendly with their shifts, and I can manage my 8-hour shifts much better with child care. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

9 Table 2, ABS, 6342.0 – Working Time Arrangements, Australia, November 2012.
The degree to which FCCS respondents felt they could have a say in which shifts they worked varied quite a bit. Some had no say at all and had to swap with colleagues or take leave if they were rostered at a time that child care was not available. Others reported having understanding and supportive managers and colleagues who would, as far as possible, ensure they worked the shifts that matched their partner’s availability to look after children or their other child care arrangements. Some examples of this are described in subsection 3.8.

As we discuss in Sections 4 and 6, variable shifts seem to be quite difficult for families to manage, such that parents in the FCCS often expressed a wish for more occasional care, or care that could be booked casually. Given this, it is not surprising that parents (typically mothers) often adjust the nature of their contract or their job to give them more stability in their roster.

3.7 Flexible jobs (employee-initiated flexibility)

Workers who have more control over their work hours are likely to have fewer difficulties in managing child care compared to others. From broader research on work-to-family spillover, we know that flexible work hours are significant in predicting workers having fewer feelings that their work negatively affects their family life (Baxter & Alexander, 2008; Ciabattari, 2007). Within the SACS, which included a broader range of occupations than the FCCS, 46% said they could sometimes change the times they started and finished work, such that they had flexible work hours. Another 43% said they could vary their work hours with approval in special situations, and 10% said that they could not vary their hours, either saying this was not likely or they definitely could not.

Within the SACS, respondents often referred to the flexibility of their workplace in describing whether their work made it particularly easy or difficult to manage child care.\textsuperscript{10} For example, on the positive side:

My flexible hours and part-time hours makes child care easy. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

My flexible work hours make managing child care a lot simpler than if I did not have the flexibility. (Father, partnered, school-aged children only)

On the negative side, those with less flexibility in hours tended to also be affected by work hours aligning poorly with their child care, especially in regard to starting early or finishing later in the day:

Having to be at my desk by 8.30 am. (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

It is hard as I must start early and finish late. I am a senior person, managing staff, and often receive directives to get work done at the end of the day. It’s then a real struggle to get to “afters” by 6 pm, as it’s up to 45-minutes’ drive in late traffic. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

There are times in the financial year when I finish an hour later than the prescribed time. During these times, it can be very stressful trying to get my child from child care in time to avoid any late pick-up penalties. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

Predictable hours makes it easier, inflexibility makes it harder. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

Self-employment was pursued by some parents in the SACS in order to have access to greater flexibility at work:

I book my clients depending on child care options that day. (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

I work for myself, and in the past, casual work and work from home, to make sure I have flexibility. It means I have not pursued “a career”, and have a low income, but am

\textsuperscript{10} Specifically, parents were asked “Is there anything about your job that makes managing child care particularly easy or difficult? Please describe.”
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here for my children, and try not to rely on organised child care. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

However, self-employment has its own flexibility challenges, as one mother in the SACS stated:

Being in my own business, I find it hard to take time off during school holidays or when the kids are sick. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Within the FCCS, flexibility for police and nurses sometimes came about through having some say in the shifts they were rostered on to. Having this input was seen as vital to many who had no flexibility in their child care arrangements. In fact, some workers had changed to part-time or casual work in order to have some say over their hours, as permanent full-time workers often had no such flexibility. Parents often talked about trying to arrange their rosters to work set days, given their child care arrangements required them to book set days of child care. For example:

But then the problem with day care as well is they’re set days, and I don’t necessarily work the set days. I can request to work those set days on my roster but it may not always be possible … Most times my boss does accommodate on the roster. Because at the moment [child] goes on a Friday, so I do request to work every Friday, and most of the time I do get rostered on for a Friday. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

A nurse in the FCCS, talking about having requested shifts that fit with the days she had booked for her school-aged child, said:

It was easy in the beginning to get those shifts rostered at work, but as she got older they’re a little bit less tolerant of flexible working days and hours and that sort of thing. So once she got to that 2, 2 and a half, it was a little bit harder to request to work those particular days, and that involved then more swapping with other people and trying to wrangle your shifts [and] change them around after the roster’s published. (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

By comparison, working full-time in the police force offered little flexibility, according to one FCCS respondent, a male police officer:

You can put in requests and say that you want to work certain shifts, but if you work full-time, a lot of the time it’s you work what you’re given … It’s not a rule as such, but it’s basically an understanding that stations work full-time. They’ll try and accommodate you as best you can, but if you’re rostered to work, you work. (Father, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

Parents in the FCCS were conflicted about requesting or not requesting certain shifts, as they were aware of the possible effects of such requests on their co-workers. Even when workplaces can be somewhat flexible to cater to the family or child care needs of workers, for some employees there is a perception that they are being unfair to other staff by taking up the more family-friendly work options (i.e., the better shifts) (see earlier quote).

Further, FCCS respondents who were in managerial roles noted the difficulties they faced in trying to balance the needs of those with and without family responsibilities in an equitable manner.

There was considerable variation within the FCCS sample in the degree to which parents experienced the flexibility they needed. When parents were unable to have a say in the shifts they were rostered on to work, one option that some had was to swap their shifts with colleagues, as was indicated by one of the nurses, noted in an earlier quote on page 23.

Another way that some workers manage inflexibility in work hours is to take different forms of leave. One partnered nurse with a child aged under 2 years talked about what it was like before changing to set shifts:

Well, our roster only comes out two weeks in advance, so I confirm with my roster coming out, and then my husband’s telling me on Friday that he’s going away on Monday. Then I’ve got to ring my boss, then I’ve got to take time off because I can’t swap shifts, because we’ve got no family here, so I’ve got no one to rely on, so it was all up to me.
So I’ve taken sick days, I’ve taken annual leave days because I couldn’t work because I had no one to do day care, so it just wasn’t working. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Taking a day off to look after children when care arrangements are not available might be managed by making use of more flexible shift arrangements, where that is possible. One father, a police officer largely working set daytime shifts, had a wife, also a police officer, whose work involved a rotating schedule. If she was rostered on to a shift that did not fit their care arrangements, he could adjust his shifts:

So if she gets rostered a weekend, that’s fine. But if she gets rostered Wednesdays and Thursdays, that presents an issue for us where, well, I usually have to stay home and then work another day somewhere to make up the day that I’ve missed. (Father, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Similar sorts of arrangements were discussed in relation to managing when children get sick (see subsection 5.4).

These findings from the FCCS and SACS demonstrate how important flexibility in the workplace is to parents, especially those who rely on formal child care, or who are juggling complex arrangements. While this report is focused on flexible child care as a means of addressing the child care needs of families, it is important to note that there were families who did not seek any different care arrangements, but they instead sought more control or more flexibility in their working hours in order to better manage their care responsibilities (see subsection 6.10).

3.8 Other workplace or employment characteristics

While the characteristics of parents’ jobs, as described above, offer some indication of the degree of flexibility parents might have in working out their child care arrangements, FCCS and the SACS participants’ descriptions of their workplaces highlighted that other workplace characteristics can also make a difference to their ability to negotiate their work and care responsibilities.

One characteristic that was frequently referred to in both studies was the degree to which managers, colleagues or human resources areas provided support or allowed workers some input into their work hours or some degree of flexibility in work hours. This finding is not surprising, as other research has highlighted these factors in being key to explaining how well workers felt they were able to meet their family responsibilities (Houston & Marks, 2003).

For example, SACS respondents had diverse experiences of the perceived family-friendliness of their workplaces:

The company I work for is very family-friendly and if I need to pick my daughter up early there is no problem with this. I am very lucky. (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

My manager is inflexible and rigid. I struggle with having to manage work and home responsibilities due to my manager’s rigidity. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

To some extent the family-friendliness of a workplace is also a factor of its size. Some workplaces have less flexibility in being able to adjust shifts or rosters for individuals, simply because of the smaller number of staff, for example. For the FCCS respondents, this appeared to be the case in regional police stations or in specialised units within hospitals.

Some respondents in the FCCS and SACS noted that their work could involve extra duties, such as travel, professional development and overtime. These opportunities could not always be taken up by those who were limited in their child care options, and this was sometimes seen to be career-limiting:

Not being able to work back due to pick-up times means the path for promotion is non-existent. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)
Attending professional development interstate on weekends or evenings is very difficult
(Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

Other difficulties were mentioned by FCCS participants. For police officers, additional duties
involved court attendance, which had to be accommodated and could be scheduled at any time.
Similarly, unplanned events, such as emergencies or incidents at work, or unexpected delays in
completion of tasks were particular problems for emergency service workers, police and nurses
that caused additional tensions and stress for those with children. This police officer explained:

It is not unusual for you to get stuck at some sort of incident where you can't just say,
“Oh sorry guys I finish at 3 pm. Can you just hold that while I change and get a new
person”. So often you will work 1 to 2 hours of overtime, at least once a week at an
absolute minimum because of what's going on. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged
children only)

This was a problem for families if children were in a formal care setting with little or no
flexibility for pick-up times. It was also a problem for couples who were attempting to juggle
their shifts to manage the child care between them.

Further to this, parents who worked in jobs that involved emergency situations, or situations
that involved someone else's wellbeing, safety or even life, were concerned that they could not
do their job fully, while also having to worry about getting to the child care centre or the school
on time. These parents wished to convey that for jobs such as these, having adequate child care
available is crucial and should be supported by the government.

3.9 Summary and final remarks

This section on workplace contexts highlighted how decisions about child care are not only a
consequence of employment arrangements, they feed into the employment arrangements that
parents take up. Even from the decision to enter employment or not, parents’ views about non-
parental child care as well as the availability and costs of child care, and the matching of child
care to potential employment, are all part of the equation.

It is generally hoped that the availability of better, more flexible child care will facilitate greater
engagement in paid work by parents, and by mothers in particular. The finding that parents
make decisions about paid work given the availability of different care options is consistent
with this goal. There was some, albeit limited, evidence of parents engaging more, or more
successfully, in paid work when their child care options improved through the Child Care
Flexibility Trials.\(^\text{11}\)

We reported here that mothers often work part-time hours to have more time to spend caring
for children. Some mothers in the FCCS reported working part-time hours as this enabled them
to take up shifts that were fixed or were able to be coordinated with the shifts of their husband.
For mothers with the option of part-time work, their family circumstances seemed to contribute
to their employment decisions. Family circumstances include the availability of a partner or
extended family members to help with the care, or having greater or more complex child care
needs. (For example, as we discuss in Section 5.6, having multiple children across a range of
ages, can make work–family negotiation much more complex.)

The result of mothers manipulating their work hours, and also of fathers taking on some of
the child care duties, is that families often end up with a child care solution that meets their
immediate needs, even if those arrangements are less than ideal. For example, some parents in
the FCCS managed their employment and child care by sharing the care between themselves and
with extended family members, even though this involved a lot of “juggling” of arrangements.

Not all parents had the flexibility in their workplaces to structure work to fit with child care.
Further, some parents felt constrained in their options by financial considerations, needing

\(^\text{11}\) Also, the “trial” nature of the child care alternatives offered through the Child Care Flexibility Trials might not
have provided enough surety to parents about their future availability in order for parents to make significant
changes to employment. If such services were in place long term, without the label of “trials”, they may be
taken up as parents re-enter employment after leave, or when they otherwise have opportunities (or need) to
change their working arrangements.
the income from employment, but then sometimes being no further ahead because of child care costs (see subsection 4.4). Some parents accepted the financial burden of child care, and struggled more with the stresses that were associated with finding appropriate care to fit their employment. The lack of availability of suitable child care spilled over into the stresses of managing work commitments or having to scale back at work.

Underlying what parents considered as viable child care solutions (and employment possibilities) were their preferences regarding what was best for their children. While some parents in the FCCS struggled with the guilt over using non-parental care in order to work longer hours, others manipulated their employment to avoid non-parental care. Usually, this was done by mothers adjusting their work to part-time hours, although some fathers also made use of flexible work hours to help manage their child care needs. Families such as these—in which parents have strong views about maximising their own time to care for children, rather than allocating more time to employment (and more non-parental care time)—may be the least likely to change their work arrangements should more flexible child care arrangements be made available. This might be so even if those options provide all they are after in terms of quality and flexibility. The shift-working families in the FCCS included families such as these, with some actually using the shift work to their advantage to maximise their time with children and to reduce reliance on non-parental care.

The trials offered child care alternatives that were immediately useful to some families who had insufficient or unsatisfactory care arrangements. As a result, some parents were able to engage more successfully in employment (increasing hours or managing the work–family stress better). Still, the trialled options for more flexible child care were not available to all families, and so a number of families in the FCCS reported having difficulties in managing work and care. As we will describe further in Section 4, those parents who reported often having difficulties were shift workers with highly variable work hours and shifts outside standard operating hours of child care. Not surprising, then, when in the FCCS we asked parents whether there was anything that the government ought to know about child care, this was a typical response:

That it doesn’t work for shift workers. It doesn’t work at all. It’s so hard, and if you don’t have family around, you’re really stuck. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)
This section now turns to the question of how families manage their need for flexible child care, given different work and family circumstances. As in Section 3, here we draw primarily on the FCCS and SACS, but contextualise this with some Australian and international literature, and some national child care data.

There are many factors that contribute to the decisions parents make about child care, with the “flexibility” of available child care being just one of those factors. Before talking about flexibility, then, we provide some context by describing other factors that are important. One important factor is that of children’s age (subsection 4.1). Subsection 4.2 then extends this to look generally at differences in child care use according to mothers’ employment status and shift patterns. Together, these subsections provide an introduction to overall child care patterns, using national data and some FCCS and SACS findings for illustration. We then discuss features of child care that contribute to parents’ decisions about the arrangements they use. Subsection 4.3 discusses “quality” as a key factor and subsection 4.4 discusses cost. In each of these we use FCCS and SACS findings to highlight how they relate to parents’ views and choices about child care. Then subsection 4.5 provides an introduction to parents’ needs for flexible child care. To explore this in detail, to describe how parents find flexibility in their care arrangements, we look separately at formal child care (subsection 4.6), informal child care (subsection 4.7), and parent-only care (subsection 4.8). We also look separately at school holiday care (subsection 4.9). This is followed by a section summary.

In Section 6 we will also focus specifically on flexible child care, to summarise what parents said through the FCCS and SACS about the features of flexible child care they sought.

4.1 Child ages and development stages

Parents’ preferences for child care arrangements vary with ages of children. They tend to have different views about what is an appropriate form of care for infants compared to preschool and school-aged children, reflecting the different developmental stages of children as they grow (Johansen et al., 1996; Kuhlthau & Mason, 1996; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999; Riley & Glass, 2002).

An overview of the child care arrangements of Australian children is shown in Figure 1 (page 28, with details shown in Table C4), which illustrates the considerable variation in the combinations of arrangements across children’s ages. These estimates are derived from the 2011 ABS Childhood Education and Care Survey, showing formal care (presented as “child care”, which includes LDC, FDC and OSHC, or “preschool”, meaning formal early childhood education (ECE) prior to commencement at full-time school) and informal care (presented as “relative”, which is predominantly grandparents, or “non-relative”). These data have been presented in a way that highlights how parents often do not rely on just one source of care, with children sometimes in a mix of formal and informal care. Key findings from this figure are:

- The largest group is of children in parent-only care, which represented 53% of children aged 0–11 years. These children are not in any child care at all. The proportion in parent-only

12 Estimates were derived from 4402.0.55.001 - Microdata: Childhood Education and Care, Australia, June 2011.
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care is high when children are under 1 year old (73%), but declines substantially through the ages 1 to 4 years. At 4 years, a minority of children are in parent-only care. The proportion in parent-only care is higher again from ages 5 years onward, when children are school-aged, such that 75% are in parent-only care at age 11 years.

■ Next largest is the proportion in child care and no other type of care. This category, “child care only”, includes LDC, FDC, OSHC and other formal (but not informal) care. Overall, 15% of children were in child care only. This was by far the greatest at ages 2 and 3 years (35% and 32% of these children respectively).

■ Then, “relative only” care is shown. This includes care by a grandparent (the most common form of this care), a parent living elsewhere, a sibling, or another relative. Overall, 15% of children were in relative-only care. This was least likely at age 4 years (4%) and most likely at age 1 year (20%).

■ Another 6% of children were in relative care as well as child care, with this being most common at ages 1 through to 3 years (12–16%).

■ Another 4% of children overall were only in preschool, but this only applies to children in the year or two prior to starting school. Some 11% of 3 year olds, 31% of 4 year olds and 9% of 5 year olds were only in preschool.

■ At age 4 years, another 11% were in preschool and cared for by a relative, while smaller proportions were in a range of different combinations of child care, preschool, relative care, or other forms of care. This applied also, to a lesser extent, at ages 3 years and 5 years.

![Figure 1: Combinations of children’s care arrangements, by child age, 2011](image)

The changes in care arrangements as children grow in part reflect changes in mothers’ employment, which becomes more likely with the age of the youngest child in the family (Baxter, 2013d). (Child care combinations are presented by mothers’ work hours in subsection 4.2). But also, changes occur as parents perceive that their children require care or early childhood education with particular characteristics. For example, families may seek different characteristics and different forms of flexibility for the care of babies compared to that of older, school-aged children.

Consistent with the national statistics, many of the families of younger children in the FCCS talked about using family and friends to care for children. This was especially so for the youngest
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One mother, for example, reflected on why she had preferred her children to be cared for by grandparents rather than in a child care centre when she returned to work:

I think it was the fact that they were with our families and they got a good bond with the grandparents. I had nothing against day care. I just wanted them to be a bit older. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

It was also apparent for school-aged children in the FCCS that parents often made use of informal child care arrangements. This sometimes reflected a lack of availability of alternative arrangements, particularly at non-standard times, such as on weekends or during the early morning.

Within the SACS, many children were in combinations of care, including informal care. Of the school-aged children in the sample, 6% were only in school, 4% were in some informal care only, 46% were in only formal care, and 43% were in some informal care as well as formal care. The sample was drawn from families using school-aged care services, so the higher rates of formal care use, compared to that of the overall population (as in Figure 1), are unsurprising. The proportions not in formal care at the time of the survey may indicate that these families use services only for school holidays or for casual bookings, or that some but not all school-aged children in the family attend formal care.\(^{13}\)

Within the SACS, by far the greater provider of informal care was grandparents (with 36% of the school-aged children sometimes being cared for by grandparents).

The younger siblings in the SACS were also often in some formal or informal child care, reflecting that few of these children had a stay-at-home parent and, in many families, single parents or both parents were employed full-time. The modal age of these younger siblings was 5 years, with 85% aged 3 years or over, so very few young children are included. Of the 103 younger siblings, all but seven children attended some formal child care or ECE. Formal care for these children was almost always an LDC centre. Some 31% were in formal child care as well as some preschool, 25% were only in formal care, 17% were in preschool, formal child care and informal care, and 10% were in both formal and informal care. Finally, 10% were in preschool plus some informal care. While this sample is not representative of the population, the diversity of arrangements mirrors those shown in Figure 1.

As children grow through the preschool years, parents increasingly value the social and educational opportunities offered by structured programs of care or ECE (see also Hand, Baxter, Sweid, Bluet-B Boyd, & Price-Robertson, 2014). Within the FCCS families, some parents indicated that they preferred centre-based arrangements as children grew older. For example:

I don't personally feel like family day care is the best choice for day-to-day for children over 2. I don't think it's a stimulating enough environment … I think it's great for babies and children under 2, but I wouldn't have my children in family day care full-time or, you know, day-to-day. I like long day care better. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Even among families with very young children, some parents expressed interest in their child being in a centre-based setting for the social opportunities. One mother of a 1 year old began by explaining that they needed to make use of a child care centre because her mother was not well enough to continue being the sole provider of care. She then said:

Another reason why we chose day care is because we wanted her to have the interaction with other children. She's not going to be having any siblings for a while, so we wanted to make sure that she had interaction with other children her own age, so she could get the social skills, and she could play with other children, and all this kind of stuff. So, you know, it's a bit boring at home with just mummy and daddy at the moment. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Some others indicated their appreciation of the development and socialisation opportunities afforded by day care settings:

\(^{13}\) The percentages were calculated over all school-aged children in the OSHC-responding families. From a total of 519 fully responding families, there were 450 school-aged children. Within these families there were also 105 children under school age.
Yes, [child 1] was only 18 months and I know that’s still not young, that’s what some people put them in, but I felt it was young for me because he wasn’t talking then. But in saying that, his development’s amazing at being at day care. He is completely different to where [his older sibling] was at this age. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

As children enter the ages for ECE, the sessional nature of preschool or kindergarten can be difficult to fit around work (Hand et al., 2014). Families sometimes use child care at this time instead of or as well as ECE, and this, to some extent, explains the variation in combinations of care for these 3–5 year old children, seen in Figure 1. For example, one father, a police officer in the FCCS who worked full-time, with a wife working part-time in the police force, had their child in LDC for one day a week, and at other times care was shared between themselves, friends and family. He explained that they needed to keep that day care place, so that their child could attend child care for early childhood education:

We’re probably a little bit more interested in … just keeping him, you know, within organised day care so that it can flow on into kinder as well. Because we’re going to have all sorts of trouble getting him to and from kinder if he goes to regular kinder. (Father, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

For others, the preschool setting was preferred over child care, because the cost to them was less. For more discussion of issues related to choice of preschool and child care in Australia, see Hand et al. (2014) and Baxter and Hand (2013).

Parents of school-aged children did not talk about OSHC in terms of the development opportunities offered. However, parents sometimes referred to the opportunities for socialisation, especially when their children enjoyed attending that care.

In the SACS, we asked parents for the reasons their child or children attend an OSHC service. The main reason, overwhelmingly, was for work-related reasons (for 69% of the school-aged children), but also 14% said it was to provide opportunities to socialise. This seemed to be more apparent for the older children (aged 11–13 years, 19% attending for this reason), compared to the younger school-aged children (5–10 years, 12% attending for this reason).

One problem that some parents with older children face is that children may find OSHC programs less appealing as they grow older, which may cause difficulties for parents who might not consider their children ready to look after themselves before or after school. In addition, OSHC is generally not available to children once they have left primary school, and yet in the early high school years, some children may be in need of supervision outside of school hours.

The variation in care arrangements by child age of course means that as children grow, parents need to find new arrangements. Parents in the FCCS sometimes talked about this, in terms of their future needs or challenges with care arrangements:

Next year, more [of the] same juggling as this year. Yes, it’s one constant juggle, especially with my job and my husband’s job and with kindy. But that's life, yes. She's got one more year at kindy there and then she's off to school, and I'm guessing the same thing happens there. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

I am concerned about availability of care for my younger child who will start kindy in 2015 (Mother, undisclosed relationship status, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Some parents noted that they understood that their child care problems would not always be there. For example, one nurse in the FCCS, talking about the difficulties in finding family time in between juggling child care between herself and her husband, states:

In my mind it's not ideal, but I know it's only for a short term, so I guess that's the way we get around it psychologically, and so that's not going to be forever. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)
4.2 Mothers’ employment and types of child care

To begin the closer examination of child care in the context of mothers’ employment, we refer to some findings of Baxter (2014b), using the ABS Childhood Education and Care Survey. The link between mothers’ work hours and children’s care arrangements is shown in Figure 2 (and also in Table C5), by broad age groups of children (0–2 years, 3–5 years, 6–11 years). Key findings from this figure:

- The likelihood that children are in parent-only care declines with increases in mothers’ work hours in each of these broad age groups. The proportion in only (formal) child care is higher when mothers work longer hours.
- For children aged 0–2 years, the proportion in relative-only care is greatest when mothers work less than 15 hours per week. Beyond this, children are more likely to be in a combination of relative care and child care.
- For school-aged children, the proportion in relative care as well as child care is very small, although it increases with longer maternal work hours. The proportion in relative-only care does not vary much across mothers’ work hours, if mothers are employed.
- Much more complexity is apparent for the 3–5 year old children. Children are more likely to be in child care when mothers work longer hours. Being in relative-only care does not appear to vary with mothers’ work hours, but children are more often in relative care plus child care when mothers work longer hours. Being in only preschool is most likely for children of not-employed mothers, or those whose mothers work fewer than 15 hours per week. The children with mothers working these relatively short hours also include those who combine relative care with preschool.

Figure 2: Combinations of children’s care arrangements, by child age group and mothers’ work hours, 2011

Note: The percentages are also shown in Table B5. Data for preschool categories only apply to 3–5 year olds. Child care refers to LDC, FDC, OSHC or other formal care. Relative care is predominantly grandparent care, but includes sibling and non-resident parent care. Preschool refers to formal ECE, generally offered in the year or two before full-time school.

Source: Baxter (2014b); Estimates were derived from 4402.0.55.001 - Microdata: Childhood Education and Care, Australia, June 2011
Child care patterns may also vary with fathers’ work hours, but they have not been explored here. Other analyses of child care in the context of parents’ employment have revealed that parents use less child care for their children when fathers are not employed, no doubt indicating that fathers are available to take on some of the care (Baxter, 2014c). Associations, however, are far stronger between mothers’ job characteristics and child care use.

Baxter (2014b) also illustrated, using data from the HILDA survey, how work-related care arrangements for children vary by mothers’ employment schedule for families with employed mothers. This is shown with a more highly aggregated classification of child care in Figure 3. Any work-related child care for children aged 0–5 years and 6–14 years is classified here as being one of formal care only, informal care only, a combination of formal and informal care, or parent-only care. Children in preschool are classified as being in formal care.

For these analyses, mothers’ work schedules were classified as: regular daytime schedule (77% overall, 73% if youngest aged 0–5 years, 80% if aged 6–14 years); regular evening/night schedule (5% overall, 6% for younger children, 4% older); rotating/split shift or on call (9% overall, 10% younger, 8% older); and irregular hours or other arrangements (10% overall, 12% younger, 8% older).

Key findings from Baxter’s (2014b) analysis:
- For school-aged children, the variation in child care patterns by mothers’ work schedule was quite minimal, although children were most likely to be in formal care when mothers worked regular daytime shifts. These children were least likely to be in only informal care.
- The school-aged children who were most likely to be in only informal care were those whose mothers worked irregular/other hours or rotating/split shifts.
- Variation was more apparent for under-school-aged children. When mothers worked regular daytime hours, these children were most likely to be in formal care only. A large proportion of these children were also in both formal and informal care.
- The pattern was similar when mothers of 0–5 year olds worked rotating/split shifts, although fewer of these children were in only formal care.
For 0–5 year olds with mothers who worked night/evening shifts, or had irregular/other hours, almost half were in parent-only care, and quite small percentages were in only formal care. The main difference between these two groups was that when mothers worked night/evening schedules children were often only in informal care and not often using both formal and informal care, while when mothers worked irregular/other hours a smaller percentage used only informal care and more used a combination of formal and informal care arrangements.

4.3 Choosing and using “quality” child care

The “quality” of child care, as defined by parents, is a central factor in parents' child care decision-making (Fenech, Harrison, & Sumson, 2011; Forry, Simkin, Wheeler, & Bock, 2013; Harris, 2008; Peyton et al., 2001) and also the degree to which they engage in work (Boyd et al., 2013; De Marco et al., 2009). What constitutes “quality” varies across families, and also is likely to change as children grow (Johansen et al., 1996).

In the FCCS, parents most often talked about quality when thinking about formal care options, but they also appeared to make assessments of the quality of care when thinking about informal care providers. These reflected similar aspects to those discussed below, consistent with research that has shown that the qualities of informal care valued by parents include those related to relationships and trust (Skinner & Finch, 2006).

“Quality” is not really a dimension of flexibility, and so we do not explore this in depth here, but we observed that it was assessed by parents in three main ways: the characteristics of the caregivers, the nature of the program or activities offered within the care setting, and the physical attributes of the service. A number of these aspects of care were also rated by parents as part of the SACS, and those findings are described here also. See Figure 4 (page 34) for the list of qualities parents were asked about in this survey.

In the FCCS, parents often talked about the characteristics of the caregivers in terms of the warmth of their interactions with children and the degree to which they were seen to provide a nurturing or stimulating environment to meet their children's developmental needs. Parents talked about the development of relationships between children and their carers, and especially seemed to value stable care for the degree to which such relationships could be formed. This was noted, for example, by parents who had been able to change their arrangements through the trials to a FDC educator who could meet their needs for flexible care. One mother talked about her children being less stressed now that they knew what the arrangements were to be after school, rather than having arrangements vary from day-to-day. A single mother who had previously relied on a mix of formal care and paid carers noticed significant improvements for her 5 year old:

The consistency has been really good … Instead of changing and depending on what private carer was available—it was a lot of chopping and changing and inconsistency for her. So now that she's just with one carer she has a really good routine, which is fantastic. She's sleeping a lot better and eating a lot better and is a lot more settled. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

How FCCS parents valued the program or the type of activities offered relates most to what parents saw as being appropriate for their child's developmental stage (as discussed in subsection 4.1) or any special needs of the child (see subsection 5.5). This parent, a single mother in the FCCS, highlighted how important it was to her than the program offered at the OSHCS was engaging for her child:

The truth is I chose the school because of the after-school and before-school care that was provided … It has amazing sorts of programs. It makes it very interesting because one thing I recognised was, you know, if you're going to ask a child to go to after-school care for essentially 7 years, it has to be engaged. I already feel guilty working the hours I do and being a single mum, let alone if she's bored and doesn't want to go to and not engage with the service. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

In relation to physical attributes, the main factor mentioned by FCCS families was location, and this also came up in the SACS open-ended responses when asked about whether their care arrangements could be improved. It was also the characteristic of school-aged care services that
parents rated the most highly (Figure 4). Location is usually identified in research as a key factor in families’ decision-making about child care (Henly & Lyons, 2000; Johansen et al., 1996). In the FCCS and SACS, location often came up in parents’ explanations for choosing or being constrained in their choice of child care. This was true in respect to the location of potential informal carers, FDC educators, child care centres and, for school-aged children, outside-school-hours care. The importance of this characteristic cannot be overstated, as clearly families who are struggling to fit child care arrangements around work and other commitments will seek a child care service that is near home, near one parent’s work, or in-between. The lack of child care services in a convenient location caused issues for many FCCS families, which we will see in some of the examples below. (See also subsection 5.3 for other related issues.) Other physical attributes mentioned in the FCCS and SACS were access to adequate parking and characteristics such as the cleanliness of a service, the overall state of the building, and access to equipment and toys.

It is also important to note that FCCS and SACS parents’ feelings about child care, whatever form they took, were often summed up in terms of whether or not children were happy there. That is, children’s wellbeing underscored much of what parents told us about child care. This is consistent with research on what (low-income) parents value in quality child care by Forry et al. (2013), in which attention to children’s health and safety were seen to be central features. In the current research, parents were certainly cognisant of children’s wellbeing when talking about children being woken up early for early starts in child care, having long days in child care, or if they had somewhat unstable child care arrangements. Parents’ overall assessments of how well their child care arrangements were working were often related to their assessments of how child care was working for their children. For example, all of the parents we spoke to who were using the FDC trials spoke positively about their child’s wellbeing in respect to their attendance at FDC. They generally spoke about children being happy and enjoying going there, and them liking their educator.

The SACS parents were asked to rate their level of agreement with a set of statements that referred to children’s enjoyment of participation in the service. Their responses are shown in Figure 5 (page 35). The majority of parents were positive in regard to their children’s feelings about attendance at the service.
4.4 The costs of child care

An important consideration for parents seeking child care was the cost of different alternatives. Cost came up throughout the FCCS when talking about the affordability of the trial projects, although, overall, there was much diversity across FCCS respondents in their views about the affordability of care. In part, this reflects that families have quite diverse child care arrangements, so the costs are similarly quite diverse. The amount paid for formal child care varies depending on who provides their care and how much they use, and some FCCS families used no or very little child care. The amount paid also varies depending on the degree of subsidisation by the government. Perceptions of affordability did seem to vary according to parents’ incomes. We did not explore this in detail, though there was some sense that parents were a little confused by what government assistance they received. Not everyone found the affordability of care to be a problem. In particular, this was the case for those who reported that the costs were sufficiently met by their incomes, who used only a little formal care, or whose care costs were subsidised.

Parents did not usually pay for informal care, and this is likely to be a factor contributing to its attractiveness over other options, although parents in the FCCS did not refer to this.

Often, but not always, parents considered that child care facilitates mothers’ employment, and so some FCCS respondents compared child care costs to the mother’s income in assessing the affordability of child care. This then relates to parents’ decision-making about employment, as discussed in subsection 3.2.

4.5 Stability and consistency (and age appropriate change) in child care

Child care stability is relevant in thinking about parents’ employment, with research highlighting that stable child care is likely to be important in allowing parents to engage in stable employment (Henly & Lyons, 2000). This research shows that informal child care can be somewhat problematic for parents’ employment if it is not reliable. However, respondents to the FCCS did not refer to this. Throughout the FCCS, it was apparent that parents highly valued stability in their care...
arrangements, whether provided by formal or informal carers, and this was usually expressed in relation to the stability being better for children's wellbeing.

A consequence of this was that those with satisfactory arrangements were unlikely to change them unless there was a need to do so. Such a need might come about because of the withdrawal of a carer, changes in parents' employment, or parents seeking new arrangements to give children new development (or socialisation) opportunities. This had implications for the Child Care Flexibility Trials, as they were really only attractive to parents who had no child care in place or who were dissatisfied with their existing arrangements.

A reluctance to change to a new child care arrangement through the Child Care Flexibility Trials was apparent within families in the FCCS, given the “trial” nature of the arrangements. The following FCCS parent, who had been using FDC prior to the trials, said:

A little while ago they were trying a flexible child care trial. So they were aimed at shift workers to do a pilot program where they were going to offer 24-hour care. But it was only a pilot and it was only for like 6 to 9 months and it's a nightmare to try to find child care. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Other parents referred to the stability of arrangements for their children in terms of how many different care arrangements they had to use in order to manage their employment. Parents often sought to minimise the number of providers, to give their children more stable or consistent child care. For example, this parent did not take up the FDC that was offered, as it only complicated her existing arrangements:

They've called me back, but they have offered me one day at one family day care and one day at another family day care, which isn't suitable for me because that would mean he's going to three different centres on three different days. It's not stable enough for him. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

4.6 Choosing and using “flexible” child care

This section focuses on the different arrangements families have in order to meet their needs for flexible care. We consider several aspects of flexibility that were identified through the FCCS as being key features of what parents considered to be “flexible” child care. These cover:

- having child care available during non-standard hours (as discussed in subsection 3.5, considered to be early mornings, evenings, overnight or weekends);
- being able to change or arrange additional care at short notice;
- being able to book care for short periods to cover times that parents’ work hours do not quite align, or to cover parts of shifts; and
- having additional features of child care that helped family life, such as the provision of meals, help with transport, and other services.

To address their child care needs for non-standard and varying work hours, parents in the FCCS adopted a range of solutions. There was a lot of mention of “juggling” shifts, of adopting ad hoc and casual arrangements, of stresses in managing work and care responsibilities, and concerns over children’s wellbeing. Some families in the FCCS made it clear that their lives were quite difficult as a result of their work and care responsibilities. Others, however, were able to make it work. Parents with a stable child care solution, or one that was to some extent seen to be workable and affordable and not compromised on quality, tended to say that they were satisfied with their current arrangements. Certain families stood out as having more difficulties than others, and some common factors that seem to contribute to such difficulties are discussed in Section 5.

Below, we describe from the FCCS and SACS findings on how families find flexibility in their child care arrangements that meets their work requirements and family circumstances. To provide some structure, this information has been organised into broad types of child care: formal child care, informal child care and parent-only care (as described in subsection 4.1). There is a separate subsection on school holiday care, which was often mentioned as an issue by those with school-aged children. Within each subsection, we identify how those care
arrangements are used to address demand for flexible care arrangements, and to identify those arrangements that caused particular difficulties for families in terms of flexibility.

4.7 Formal child care

The recruitment methods used for the FCCS and SACS, including families that made use of the care at the Child Care Flexibility Trial sites, meant that we captured a number of families using formal child care providers, especially those using FDC, LDC and OSHC. As described in subsection 4.1, in these families this formal care was often supplemented with some informal care. Some families also had children in the year or two before full-time school who attended a standalone preschool or kindergarten, but as our research does not relate specifically to these services, we only touch on issues related to them.

Many of the FCCS families were using, or had in the past used, LDC or OSHC for their children. All the SACS respondents had some engagement with this type of care. Parents in each of the studies saw value in this child care environment for providing opportunities for socialisation and development of their children. Some also noted that they valued knowing that child care centres must meet certain quality standards, such that they feel their children are safe and secure in that environment, and the carers or educators are appropriately qualified. While the high cost of child care centres was often mentioned by FCCS participants as a negative aspect of this form of care, parents were otherwise generally very positive about the quality of the care provided in these centres. However, with regard to the flexibility sought by FCCS (and some SACS) parents, child care centres did not always deliver what parents needed, as discussed under the separate points below.

A number of families in the FCCS were currently using FDC, the other type of formal care discussed here. While only a small proportion of children, nationally, attend FDC, our FCCS interviews highlighted the usefulness of this form of care for shift-working families.\footnote{At June 2011, across Australia, 81,000 children aged 0–12 years usually attended FDC (2% of children) (ABS, 2012, Table 1).} The key features of FDC are that it usually involves care of a small number of children being provided by an FDC educator in her home (all educators in the FCCS were women). FDC is regulated and is subject to the National Quality Standards. FCCS parents valued the smaller group sizes of FDC and the relationships that formed between the educator and their children. For some, FDC also provided the flexibility that they could not get anywhere else. A downside, experienced by some FCCS respondents, was that FDC educators themselves might take some time off, might get sick or even decide to stop working as an educator. Such changes can be stressful for parents, as they would then have to find alternative care, and manage the instability for their children. This was evident in the experiences of some of the FCCS families; for example:

Yes, it’s just when I haven’t got family day care, when she’s on leave, it’s just stressful just trying to organise. Geez, who am I going to get to look after her this time? Once I’ve got that sorted it’s fine, but it’s just the process of: Geez, I’ve got to try and organise something. When you haven’t got family that makes it hard. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Below we discuss some overall issues with regard to formal child care, and then some specific ones that relate to flexible child care.

Availability of formal child care

Many FCCS parents referred to problems in accessing the formal child care they needed, whether through a child care centre or FDC. This was especially difficult when parents sought care on specific days (to match an expected work schedule) or with some flexibility, or for multiple children. For example, this nurse explored the availability of centre-based care:

When I was ringing around, one place would say they had Thursdays available, another place had Mondays, but I wouldn’t sort of chop and change between, you know … It’s
there, but only if you want set days. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Parents in the FCCS talked about having to place their child's name on multiple waiting lists when planning for mothers' return to work after a period of leave. This included FDC. For example, when we asked a police officer in the FCCS whether he and his wife had considered FDC, he replied:

Yes, we put our name down on the list for that, but they pretty much laughed at us. The waiting list was huge and we'd never get in, so they pretty much told us not to bother putting our name down, actually. The waiting list was that long. So yes, we considered that, but it was all too hard. (Father, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

One nurse said of FDC:

There is family day care around, but they've been harder to get into than day care centres. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Parents in the FCCS sometimes had to accept a place with a service even if it did not quite meet all their needs in terms of quality or flexibility. For example, in one family, their child attended an LDC centre, but the opening hours were not well suited to the parents' work hours. The respondent was not optimistic of being able to gain a place in a centre she knew of that offered better hours:

Well I've got her down on a wait list for another day care, and that does open at six o'clock in the morning, but it's a Catholic day care up here that's associated with the hospital that I work at, and the wait list is massive. So, you know, I don't like my chance for getting in there any time soon. But at least we're on the wait list. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Parents also talked about how an offer of a place really has to be accepted, even if the timing does not align with what is needed. This meant having to start paying for a place before returning to work. This, of course, has implications for the affordability of that care, if parents are not earning their usual income while away from work.

Information about formal child care

It was also evident that some FCCS parents did not feel that they had sufficient information about the formal child care arrangements available to them. International research on parental decision-making about child care has found that parents' information about child care availability and quality is often sought from family, friends and neighbours, who may (perhaps unknowingly) filter information about possible solutions based on their own personal experiences and their own ideas about appropriate forms of care (Riley & Glass, 2002).

Parents in the FCCS who had participated in or expressed interest in the FDC trials had found out about these trials through stakeholder organisations. Some of these parents said they may not have considered FDC without this invitation, highlighting the value of providing this information to new parents, who might not be fully aware of all their child care options.

Care outside of standard hours

Turning now to specific aspects of “flexible” care, one characteristic of child care centres and OSHC that caused difficulties for many FCCS families, and also some SACS families, was the opening hours of the service. Most obviously, these services were unable to provide care during non-standard hours, such as early mornings, evenings, overnight and on weekends.

Through the Child Care Flexibility Trials, two LDC services (at a number of sites) offered extended opening hours (by an additional half an hour at the beginning and/or end of the day; the exact changes varied across the different services). At one service, these extended hours became normal operating hours and so parents did not need to pay extra or to book into those extended hours separately. Parents we spoke to were usually aware of these changes to opening hours, and those who had made use of the extended hours spoke very positively about them. For example, talking about closing time, this parent from this trial service said:
I'm really happy with our child care. Like, you know, they're open till 6.30 now, like they used to be open till 6, which was sometimes a bit of a push for us. So them being open till 6.30 is, you know, enough time for us to go and get [child] so that's really good … And that's only good for those days when you are running late. Like, we normally pick him up before 6, but those days where we're having a bad day and running late, then they come in handy. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Another participant used a service that opened at 7 am, and she wondered whether an earlier opening might be helpful, but her comment below mirrors the views of others described earlier in this report about concerns over having to get children to care early in the morning:

They open at 7 in the morning. I don't know, possibly an opening at 6.30 could maybe help but, you know, it's still quite early for the kids so, look, it's been fine for me. It's working well. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

At the other LDC service trialling extended hours, parents needed to book the extended hours session ahead of time, and to pay extra for that session. While take-up by parents was low, it was valued by those who used it. For example, one family had made use of early starts on days that the mother, a nurse, worked early morning shifts. She talks about needing this early start, saying:

Before the trial started, my husband was dropping all three of them off, but it was making him very, very late for work. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

She goes on to say how stressful this had been for her husband, given his role at work really required him to be at his place of work on time. So the availability of early starts had been extremely helpful for his negotiation of work and family roles.

Some parents talked about specifically choosing this LDC service as their child care provider given the availability of early starts. This was the case for two nurses we spoke to. One mother with an under-school-aged child had a shift starting at 6.30 am, and so needed a 6 am start time for child care. Her child started at this service when she returned to work after maternity leave. Another had a shift starting at 7 am, but needed the 6 am start to get to work on time. Before enrolment in this service, their care needs had been met by themselves (by her husband in the morning) or by other family or friends. When asked whether care from 6 am was meeting her needs, she said, “Yes, it’s definitely been meeting my needs”.

Another participant, a retail worker, told us that they selected this service for their 1 year old upon returning to work because of the opening hours:

I needed a day care centre that had early care. So places that opened from 6–6.30, and this was one of those places. At the time, they were just doing a trial, to see if there was any particular interest in it, but there was, so that's part of their regular hours now—6 am to 6 pm, 6.30 pm. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

She said this care is “perfect for me, because I start at 6.30. So it's about a 15-minute drive from my work.”

Parents in the FCCS and the SACS also discussed the opening hours of services as not quite meeting their needs, with them preferring slightly earlier opening or slightly later closing times. Other research on nurses' child care arrangements has similarly shown that when child care centres do open outside standard hours, the opening hours still may not align sufficiently with workers' shifts to enable care to be used effectively (Nowak et al., 2013).

Earlier opening hours were sought by FCCS shift workers who had no flexibility in the timing of the start of their shift. There were examples of families reporting that their morning shift started at 6.30 am, but child care did not open until this time or later, such that they needed to call upon other family members (including grandparents) to help take their children to child care. For example, the following nurses and police officers experienced these difficulties:

Mostly [the challenge] was just when I started work at 6 o'clock. The day care didn't open till 6.30. So, I sort of had to rely on other people to take my son to day care. (Mother, single parent, school-aged and under-school-aged children)
My normal duties [are] 6 to 6, and I can’t drop the kids off, do you know what I mean? Like, we’re both sort of stuck because the child care doesn’t open till 6.30 in the morning. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

So with the child care at the moment, with my work and hubby’s work, there’s days where we struggle to get them in or out of child care because of the times that they start. So I guess the easiest child care for them was with the school, and it goes from 7 till 6.30. With my shifts, I can start at 7, so there’s no way I can get them to care at 7 o’clock when I start at 7. Hubby starts before 7, so I’m stuck. With after-school care there’s some shifts where I don’t finish till 8.30 and hubby, being a courier, he doesn’t have to kind of stick around afterwards, but he feels obliged to. But there are days where he really has to push himself to get out in time to pick the girls up by 6.30. So I find that’s our biggest struggle. Just the hours, I guess, that the care is open to. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

It should be noted that not everyone in the FCCS had problems with opening hours. Many respondents noted that the opening or closing hours worked for them. It depended upon the timing of the opening hours in conjunction with the timing of shifts starting and the proximity of the centre relative to home and work. For example, one nurse spoke of being fortunate in having a child care centre that opened at 6.30 am, giving her sufficient time to take her child to care and then start her shift at 7 am (see quote on page 19).

The opening hours of child care services were problematic not only for shift workers in the FCCS, parents with other work schedules sometimes also sought early starts in order to commence work early or to manage a long commute before starting work. As a result, parents often reported selecting specific child care services because of the hours the service was open. One respondent, who had a full-time job as a retail manager, was asked whether she chose her child care centre because of the hours it offered, and answered:

Yes, it was actually one of the biggest factors. I needed a day care centre that had early care. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Some school-aged care services are also limited in their hours of operation, with some parents having no access to before-school care, or this care opening too late in the morning, providing more limitations to parents in their ability to manage early starts at work. The following parents in the SACS mentioned these difficulties with child care:

Dropping my children at before-care (which opens at 7.30) does not always allow me to get to work at the time I need to get there. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Have to start later, because before-school care doesn’t open early enough. (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

At the other end of the day, workers’ shifts did not always align with centre closing hours. Parents in the FCCS talked about juggling between themselves or calling upon the help of others to manage pick-ups where this applied. An added problem, though, was that parents were not always able to leave work at the expected time, or faced problems in their commute from work to child care that meant considerable stress, and sometimes a financial penalty, to parents trying to pick up children before closing times:

And also I finish late some nights. Once a fortnight I work till 6/6.30 and a lot of child cares are not open or they shut at 6 or 6.30, so if I get held up with a client, if I have to call them an ambulance or something, I can be stuck there for an hour. And if I’m late, like, and my husband is at work, I don’t have anyone to pick her up if the child care shuts, you know. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

The inflexibility of closing hours was what was particularly stressful in these circumstances, especially if closing time was earlier than what parents viewed to be an ideal closing time. Parents, especially, had difficulties with the late fees they were facing if they were late to child care because of work or commuting problems:

That’s the thing. It’s 6 am to 6 pm, and in the majority of your standard day care centres if you’re late, the late fee is something like $15 a minute. For, say a shift worker … we
might get a late callout at 5.30, taking you half an hour late, that’s an absolute fortune. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

If anyone kept me or if I can foresee that they’re going to keep me late, I’ll just say straight up to them, “It’s going to cost you $75 if I don’t leave within the next 10 minutes. If you want me to stay longer, you will have to be prepared to pay that amount, because that’s what it’s going to cost me.” And they quickly say, “Oh OK”, and they realise the pressure that I’m under, and I say “Look, I’ve been hit for $2 a minute for being late, plus a $20 fee.” And I’ve talked to mums that have been hit with a $200 bill because they were caught in heavy traffic on the Harbour Bridge, things like that, and they can do nothing about it. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

Some families also noted that non-standard hours of care were also hard to come by in FDC. As experienced by this respondent seeking FDC during non-standard hours:

Like, I’m not joking, it took me about a year to find family day care. I had [child] on a waiting list to find family day care, knowing the hours in which I work, [needing] a trained educator, needing early and late. So needing someone for those hours, and not all educators in family day care are happy to do those hours. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

This reflects that some educators elect to only provide care within standard hours or may not have additional capacity for non-standard hours care.

Nevertheless, some FCCS families using FDC had found educators who could provide care during non-standard hours. This was being offered as part of the trials, but also, the following quotes provide examples of how some families were able to find FDC educators who met at least some of their non-standard-hours care needs, even those who had not done so through the trials:

Yes, [the FDC educator] is happy to start at, you know, 6.20 in the morning for me, and take [child] down to the school. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

I found another family day care worker that’s very flexible with hours and times. Unfortunately she can’t do any weekdays any more because she’s full with kids on weekdays. So the only hours that I can get her are for weekends. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

Compared to centre-based care, FDC was often seen by FCCS participants to be very positive in respect to the stresses and difficulties of pick-up times. One couple (a police officer and a paramedic) with a 1 year old in a child care centre, thought that FDC could be better for them, given the potential for more flexibility in hours. For example, the mother said:

Well, the day care closes at 6.30. With family day care they’re pretty much always there, so it would just be more workable for us. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

One police officer in the FCCS noted that some flexibility in their start and finish times was offered by their FDC educator:

Well, we normally drop the boys off there at about a quarter to eight in the morning and are picking them up somewhere around about 4.30 … If we have to start earlier or finish later that’s not a problem for her. So there’s a little bit of flexibility with the hours there, which is good. (Father, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

They used this educator 3 days per week, but were unable to get additional weekdays with her as she was “booked solid” for those other days. However, they had some additional flexibility in that she was available for weekend care if needed.

In the absence of non-standard hours care, FCCS parents talked about being limited in their work options, or relying instead on family or friends, and/or juggling care between parents. Shift-working parents often discussed their unmet need for this care, with some being clear in their wish for 24/7 care, weekend care, additional formal occasional care or in-home care to meet these needs (see Section 6).
Some FCCS participants, though, were (somewhat) satisfied to rely on sources other than formal care, especially during hours when it was felt children were best off being at home or with family. Parents were especially conscious of children’s needs for sleep, and were concerned about waking children early to get them to child care, or having rushed or late evenings, which could compromise opportunities for family time and sleep.

Irregular or rotating shifts and child care

In the FCCS, a very commonly expressed problem for shift-working families was that rotating or irregular rosters meant that their child care needs were not fixed. Variable child care needs could rarely be accommodated in centre-based care:

We don’t use any child care at the moment because we can’t. Because the only way that I would be able to use child care is if I had somewhere with flexible occasional days. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

But then the problem with day care as well is they’re set days, and I don’t necessarily work the set days. I can request to work those set days on my roster, but it may not always be possible. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Families also experienced problems with finding FDC educators who could accommodate variable rosters. The nurse cited above had looked into using FDC as a means of managing variable hours:

When I looked more into it and actually spoke to somebody, I sort of got the impression family day care was, you know, if my shifts changed then I could change whatever times you could have care. But that’s not necessarily the case. You sort of have your set days as well, and if they have vacancies on other days then you could pick those up, but it’s sort of not a sure thing. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Likewise, one FCCS parent had found engagement with the FDC trial did not work the way she had expected. She thought that the trial promised great things for flexible care, but it did not deliver on her expectations. In particular, she was only offered one educator, who did not have the capacity to provide the flexible care they required. She was able to get some set days for care of her two youngest children, an arrangement that was in place prior to the trials. However, she had another under-school-age child who was in preschool two days per week, and she was never able to get access to care that could accommodate all three of these children, given that her educator was already at capacity with the other children she cared for. She was not offered a back-up carer to help. She understood the issues that constrained availability, but was nevertheless frustrated by them. She communicated with her local FDC office about her frustrations, and relayed her understanding of the situation to us:

They didn’t have enough carers. The carers that [FDC service] had on their books for family day care, they all run their own business, per se, so it’s in their best interest to book as many children in as they can, within their quota. So the issue that they had [was] the carers did not want to take part in the trial, because you don’t have a guaranteed booking on a certain day, so they might knock back someone on permanent Mondays for a year, when they might only get someone from the flexibility trials one Monday every 6 weeks. For the other 5 weeks it would be a vacant position. That’s why none of the carers wanted to do it, and I completely understand that, and that’s fine, but it shouldn’t have been offered in the first place. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

In the end, they left FDC because they were paying for their set bookings for the two younger children on days that the mother had to take leave, given there was no care available for her other under-school-aged child.

Some FCCS families did report that their service (LDC, OSHC or FDC educator) had the capacity to accommodate casual bookings or changes to bookings. For example:

But so far I’ve found with our family day care arrangements that they’ve been more than flexible if I have a change in my shift. And they’re happy most of the time to change the day or the hours that my son goes into day care for that day. Obviously I give them as
much pre-warning as possible and my workplace knows that I check with day care first and if day care can cover it then I’ll do that change. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

I can’t set days in the child care. I need flexibility. Because every fortnight my days are changing. But I can say that: until the end of the year, which all the day I’m working. So that’s why I was sending my little one to basically this sort of care—family day care—where they can accommodate according to my changing roster. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Before my little boy started Prep, I was using two day care centres because I had him booked in for three days a week—Wednesday, Thursday, Friday—which were set days at one centre, and then sometimes I would have to work on a Monday or a Tuesday, so I would use another centre that was actually flexible and let me just do an as-needs basis. So the year before he went to school, I was using two day care centres for him. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

We’ve got a good understanding with our day care. We can just ring up and go, “Righto, can we book them in today?” So that’s sort of as we need it. So sometimes it could be three or four days a week that we need it, and other days it could be only one or two days a week that we need it. (Father, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

For FCCS families who had explored FDC through the trials, who already had care arrangements in place, parents generally told us that they were attracted by the flexibility that the FDC trials offered. For example, one nurse had her child in an LDC centre at the time she put her name down for the trial and explains why she was interested:

Well, because as a nurse I’m supposed to be available. Our morning check-up nurses are on night shift and I’m supposed to be on-call and stuff like that. And because my husband goes away at a minute’s notice all the time, I needed something that if I wasn’t on afternoon shift and I wasn’t finished by 6.30 when the day care closed, that she could stay there for a little bit extra or whatever. So that was the reason for it. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

For the FCCS families who were engaged with the FDC trials, there were varying degrees of flexibility in the arrangements they had with their educator. Arrangements included those who had some set days of FDC, those who had a mixture of set days and variable days, and those who matched their care to a variable work roster. Parents also talked about their educators being able to accommodate changes and last-minute requests for care. Parents used their FDC educators for care during non-standard hours, including overnight and on weekends. In some families, educators were also able to help with early morning and after-school arrangements, including drop-offs and pick-ups to and from school.

Regardless of the arrangements made, parents participated in the trial were very happy with the level of flexibility they had arranged with their educator. Those who had access to very flexible child care could not speak highly enough of the degree to which their arrangements had worked for them, saying things like:

You can’t have any option better than this … She’s brilliant … She’s like a friend—like more than a friend—so very flexible. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children).

Parents in these circumstances appreciated that they were able to access this flexibility because of the willingness of their individual educator to provide this level of service.

Regarding access to casual child care bookings, some services only made this available to those whose work schedules necessitated them. For example, one FCCS family had children in before- and after-school care. The mother worked part-time as a nurse, and her husband had a full-time job as a courier. Her work hours varied, and because of this, they had access to somewhat flexible child care:

[Child care head office] actually said that they have made arrangements now for families who have got shifts that change all the time. Like, they don’t have you know fixed Monday to Friday, 9 till 5, that kind of thing. So I had to get a letter from work that stated
the facts, that I didn’t have the same shifts every week. And now I only need to give them, I think, a day’s notice to get the children in. Yes, it is good. But once you book them in, if work changes my shifts, I’ve got to give them a week’s notice to cancel it, otherwise I have to pay for it. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

The majority of FCCS families of parents working variable hours did not have access to formal child care that enabled bookings to be altered to match variable shifts. Different child care solutions were found by these families. One solution was to book a full-time child care place, knowing that the care would be needed some of those days. The following case illustrates this:

Well, we have [child] booked in five days a week for before- and after-school care, even though we don’t always need it, depending on my shifts. But you have to basically hold the place, so you have to pay for every day even though you might only use two days in the week. So we use that basically for her care and, depending on the shifts, one or the other of us drops her off or picks her up … On a typical week I might only use two or three days or part days of that care, but I pay for a full time care, you know … I thought when she started school I might be able to, you know, let them know what days I needed in advance and just use those days, but it’s similar to day care that you have to, like, book a spot … You can pay for casual days but you can’t be guaranteed that there will be a spot available on any given day … I don’t have to worry about it, you know, if I decide to do something different or change shifts or pick up extra days, or nights, whatever, I don’t have to kind of worry because I know she’s always booked in if I need it, sort of thing. But it is annoying to have to pay for it when I don’t need it . (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

Essentially we’ve been booking in for all of my hours so that, irrespective of what shift I’m doing and what his dad might or might not be doing, I’m covered from week beginning to week end. And then in the meantime, if things change, he can stay home for one of those days and so be it—he stays home for one of those days. But I pay for the full time just so that I’m guaranteed. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Yes, well, it’s definitely hard for shift workers because that’s why I was reluctant to put our daughter in anywhere, because I’d be paying for days that I wouldn’t be working, and I would want her to be home with me, but I still have to pay for it. And just even getting in to places these days is so hard. So I would have had to book her in, say, twice a week at a normal place, though they might have been my days off, and I might have not needed her to be going to day care, but I would send her because we’ve paid for it. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

Other FCCS families adopted a combination strategy of booking in some set days of child care, and then using other informal (or parent-only) care when work did not align with those days of child care. This worked as a solution when parents’ rosters involved some set and some variable days, or when parents had more say over their roster and could request to be rostered on for particular days in the week.

Some parents reported that if they booked child care but ended up not working those days, then they sent the child to care on those days anyway, for at least part of the day. Other parents reported keeping children at home, even though they had a booking for the day. (This has implications for “absences”—see below.)

Booking set days, especially for those booking a full-time place, is obviously not a cheap solution. From the FCCS, however, we saw that parents booked set days in child care in this way to reduce their stress or worry about finding child care, as in the example above. Those parents with variable work hours and without a stable child care arrangement in place often talked about their worries in managing work and care, sometimes tied up with worries about income:

Well, it does fluctuate, and if I don’t get work, I don’t get paid and, you know, it makes it hard. It’s a constant worry and it’s a constant worry with day care as well. You know, getting the day care. Being able to get him into day care when you get the work. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

So trying to juggle and find someone to care for [child] on that early shift, like that can be stressful in itself, and also trying to juggle someone for 45 minutes in the afternoon, to
FCCS parents looking for child care solutions for variable work hours very often indicated that they would like to see greater availability of occasional child care, such that a place could be changed or booked at short notice. For example:

More flexibility in terms of holding your spot but then also having the ability to either add a couple of days or drop a couple of days. I don’t know how that would work as a business model but that’ll definitely be more convenient. (Father, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

As indicated by the above example, and in the responses of many FCCS parents, there was recognition that delivering a variable service in this way might be difficult from a business perspective.

For some FCCS parents, the demand for formal occasional care involved care outside of standard hours. This again related to some parents’ wishes for 24/7 or weekend care. A problem with this, however, is that it appears likely to be difficult to anticipate the demand for such a service. Parents in the FCCS, like this FDC user, said that they would like to know the option of weekend or overnight care was there, even though they did not seem to have a regular need for it:

No, because the lady that we’re using, we haven’t needed her for weekends, but she’s happy to do weekends and she’s happy to have children for the night. Like, if we wanted to leave our daughter there for the night she’d be happy. So we haven’t needed that, but it’s really handy for us to know that that option is there. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

To what extent there would be take-up of casual bookings of formal care during non-standard hours is difficult to determine. (See subsections 3.5 and 6.3 for overall discussions of parents’ wishes for weekend care.)

Formal paid-per-hour child care

Another feature of centre-based care that caused difficulties for some FCCS families was that care could only be booked for a whole day or, with OSHC, for a whole session. Some parents instead wanted to be able to book shorter sessions of care—to be able to pay for care by the hour. In the case of shift-working families, the requirement to book longer hours than needed was particularly keenly felt by those who only needed care to cover a short window of time, during an overlap of shifts. One family had access to a flexible child care centre, and so could access such arrangements:

The child care agreed to, like, for a couple of hours, look after the kids if our shifts overlapped … They might charge us $20–30 for a couple of hours. They don’t charge us for the half day or the full day. They just charge us for the time that we use. (Father, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

FCCS parents who talked about overlapping shifts in this way tended to wish they had access to formal occasional care, such that short hours of care could be booked or changed as needed to match the working hours of parents in the household:

If care only did an hour rate rather than a before- and after-school rate, that would also work better, because obviously if you’re finishing at 4 o’clock, let’s say, you [should only] pay for an hour … till 4 o’clock, but you’re paying them up until 6.30 … So it does become very costly with three children to have them in care every day. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

It would be helpful if we did not have to have her in for a whole day, because sometimes our shifts only overlap by a couple of hours. So if that’s the case it would be nice to put her in for just a few hours and not have to pay for a whole day. Because she doesn’t need to be there when we’re at home. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Some FCCS parents similarly talked about needing incidental care for times they had additional duties (see subsection 3.8):
Yes, it’s really annoying … It would be great to be able to drop them off where they go routinely, just for 2 or 3 hours while you go to court or whatever. But you can’t do that. They only have them in for the day for the set days. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

These issues were often framed in relation to the cost of having to book more care than was actually needed. For some shift workers, costs blew out as they had to pay for a full day of child care (given it could only be booked in days, not hours), plus additional care for the evening, when an afternoon or evening shift meant the regular hours of day care did not cover their shift:

If I was working a 3 o’clock shift, I would put [child] into the day care at about 2 or 2.30 in the afternoon, and he would stay there until 6 or 6.30, when he got picked up. So he was only there for 3 hours or something, but they would still charge me for 8 hours. That’s the minimum that they would charge for. So even for 3 or 4 hours worth of child care, I was still paying for a full 8 hours. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

However, for other FCCS families, it was cost as well as convenience that contributed to their wish for some occasional care. Without access to formal occasional care, parents had to make ad hoc arrangements with family and friends, or pay for a longer session (or full day of care), even if it was only to be used for a portion of the time.

**Child care absences**

Because many FCCS shift-working families booked their child in for more days of care than they used, families were often confronted with a problem of exceeding the allowable absences for the children attending care. This had financial implications for parents, who then had higher out-of-pocket costs for their care. For example:

> The other part is the family day care company want me on contracts with them so that I nominate days that she's going to be in care, which I can't, obviously. And then when she's absent, it gets marked as an absent. And you've only got, I think, 40 absences a year, and you don't get your benefits any more. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

The way this works is not always clear to parents:

> I guess another thing is the allowable absences. Sometimes … I think I’ve booked in for a certain amount of hours or something … I’ve gone over my allowable absences even though we haven’t actually been absent. It’s just because it’s something to do with the way it’s been booked in. But I have to get a letter now from my employer that’s basically saying that I do have to work shift work and these are the hours I have to work, and something like that. So yes, something to do with allowable absences, and I don’t know. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

Regardless of the absences issue, there was considerable negative sentiment within the FCCS about paying for child care that ends up not being used:

> So it’s one thing that I would love to see. I also understand that the educators need a reliable income, but it’d be great to see at least something like a reduced amount that we have to pay when the kids actually aren’t there. (Father, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

While such comments largely related to the difficulties in aligning child care bookings with care needed during work hours, a number of FCCS parents wished to relay their feelings of unhappiness about having to pay for child care on days their children could not attend child care due to children’s illness:

> But the only thing I find with day care that is annoying [is] that, you know, you’ve still got to pay if they are sick. Like there should be, if you’ve got a doctor’s certificate and they’re genuinely sick, at least you may get half back or something. Do you know what I mean? I just think that’s a bit unfair. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)
Further, shift-working parents in the FCCS were unhappy with having to pay for child care places when child care was not available on public holidays. While this applies to all parents, shift-working parents are especially disadvantaged if they are themselves working those days and need to make alternate care arrangements:

They close on public holidays and, unless you ask them, they'll still charge you the full day even though they're not open. We agreed if you give them 2 weeks' notice, you can put in for a holiday and it's half price. So yes, if there's a public holiday on a Tuesday, he's booked in there and I've forgotten, I still pay, even though he doesn't go and then they call you. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Other characteristics that help with flexibility

The FCCS highlighted that there are other qualities of child care that can be helpful to parents seeking flexible child care solutions. One aspect of child care that parents found helpful (or sought access to) was the provision of meals. One parent, for example, referred to an FDC educator who used to collect his children from school and had them into the evening, but did not provide meals. He compared this to his current privately organised child care provider who did provide meals:

But it was a lot more expensive doing it through the registered day care, and she didn't cook meals or any of that sort of stuff, so my family had to cook meals and then supply them. And so a lot of my time, even outside of the kids being in child care, was spent preparing to take them to child care. So that was tough, that was really difficult. The private one that we're using at the moment, because she's got two young kids as well, she's cooking meals and that sort of stuff anyway, so she doesn't charge me any extra to take the kids there and feed them. (Father, single parent, school-aged children only)

It was noted, however, by one FCCS respondent that services such as this in child care centres might be contributing to higher costs:

So whether it is that the prices go up because meals are provided or whatever. Maybe just bring your own meals instead to reduce costs, or something like that. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

Through the trials, some LDC centres trialled the provision of additional services to try to be more flexible for parents, such as facilitating a commercial coffee cart (in the mornings) and pizza van (in the evenings). These services were expected to contribute to reducing the stress of balancing work and child care. Some of the parents talked about using and enjoying the coffee service, and this father highlighted the benefits to him of having the pizza service:

Oh yes, they've quite good interest. They had the pizza truck on Friday nights. They're there from about 4 o'clock, just in one section of the car park, but it's terrific. If it's been there when I pick up the boys, then it's actually the time I speak the most to the other parents ... That's a great incentive and I started to actually get to know the other parents. (Father, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

In addition to meals, the idea of having children do homework while at after-school care held some appeal to parents in the SACS and FCCS:

I would like the centre to provide dinner for the kids that get picked up after 6 pm, and also do their homework, so when the parents are with the kids they can spend quality time and communicate. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

I think it would be good if they all came back and ate, and then did some homework, and then went and did the other activities that are on, because it's really hard when you get home at quarter to 6, and you've got to cook dinner and try to get them to bed at a reasonable hour, to then try and squeeze some homework in there when they've been sitting at after-school care for 2 or 3 hours, you know. (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)
One of the services used by FCCS participants addressed the homework issue comprehensively, as described by one parent whose children were attending the service after school:

So this service you can nominate and they assist with making sure the homework's done. And you can nominate if you want them to do that 1 day a week, 2 days a week, if you want the child to determine that they want to do homework or not. So you can empower the child. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

In addition, according to that parent, their program meant children had access to other extracurricular activities, including sport, music and languages.

Another general suggestion by an FCCS participant related to getting children ready for home and bed:

Maybe if it was open that late, maybe if they could give them dinner, it would make it easier. Probably not a great deal else they do. Because I still have to get them home and get them to bed. Just that I guess, wind them down for the evening, so that they're ready for bed, like, as soon as they get home. Just probably that or just making sure they've had their dinner. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

Another feature of child care that contributed to the ease of managing work and care arrangements for some FCCS participants was assistance with transport. In particular, when children were being cared for by an FDC educator before or after school, this transport to and from school was important for some families. One FCCS participant spoke of how their OSHC services included accompanying children to and from extracurricular activities (that were presumably located also on the school grounds), which no doubt provided opportunities for children that might otherwise not be available. For children with disabilities, the lack of transport contributed to some parents' inability to use the school holiday program that was offered through the trials (see Appendix A).

In relation to the location of the child care, one way that child care can be delivered is through a workplace or employer-provided child care centre. Research on workplace child care has found that, within health care, the availability of workplace occasional and extended-hours child care is one of the factors that facilitates the retention of nurses (Maher, Lindsay, & Advocat, 2008) and doctors (End, Mittlboeck, & Pizzi-Katzer, 2004; Mayer, Ho, & Goodnight, 2001; Verlander, 2004). In Renda, Baxter, and Alexander's (2009) study of parents' reports of policies that might have assisted them in the time after their birth, having workplace-based child care was often mentioned. Nowak et al. (2013) also reported that nurses in their study expressed strong desires for on-site facilities, that could cater for young children, fit with flexible rosters, assist breastfeeding mothers and provide parents with peace of mind. When on-site care is available, however, not everyone uses it, partly because opening hours are not necessarily compatible with working hours (Robinson, Davey, & Murrells, 2003).

None of the FCCS respondents had used workplace-based or employer-provided child care. For shift-working parents, if such a service provided flexible care during non-standard hours, this could be one approach that works:

I think ideally what would work the best for nurses would be having a crèche or a child care facility within the hospital. I think having one that is available to hospital staff that are willing to do the 12-hour shifts, and enabling breastfeeding as well, I think, would have been definitely way more better. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

The only way it that it could possibly improve would be if there was care available on the hospital grounds, or attached to the hospital grounds ... It would cut out a lot of travel expenses and time if care was available at the hospital. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

Some FCCS participants thought workplace child care offered some possibilities, but limitations were also recognised:

I always thought before I had her that having some sort of child care at the hospital would have been quite good, but you know, once I did put her into day care, I realised that if you had that sort of system they wouldn't have continuity of carers. And the
Flexible child care and Australian parents’ work and care decision-making

For the police, the feasibility of workplace child care was seen by FCCS participants to vary, depending on the size of the station. There was some recognition it might be useful in larger, but not smaller stations. For example:

You know, I think, organisationally I would have certainly tapped into that resource if there was child care available with Victoria Police, just for that flexibility. And, you know, I wouldn’t expect every station to have it because it’s not feasible, but certainly a large headquarters or a large workplace. (Father, single parent, school-aged children only)

4.8 Informal child care

We saw in subsection 4.1 that informal care is often used by families, sometimes as the sole form of child care and sometimes supplementing formal care arrangements. Many FCCS respondents had parents or parents-in-law provide care for children. Sometimes this was ad hoc, depending on what shifts parents were working, while others had children regularly cared for by these extended family members, such as in this family:

[Our child care arrangements] usually work because my mother-in-law retired at the end of last year, so she was able to help out looking after my son. But the biggest problem I find is that when I’m on a morning shift at work, I start at 6.30 in the morning and the day care doesn’t open till 6.30 in the morning, so I either have to wake the kids up earlier to drop them off at my mother-in-law’s and she then takes them to day care and school, or they need to stay over at her house the night before. It is challenging, you know. We need to make sure that we’re all sort of on the same page and I give my roster to my mother-in-law so she sort of knows what days she’ll be having [child 1] and [child 2] around. So it can be challenging sometimes. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

While parents and parents-in-law were most-often mentioned as the care providers to FCCS families, other family members (such as sisters) sometimes provided care. Others, especially those who did not have family support, called upon friends to help.

Informal carers were generally not reported to provide full-time child care in the FCCS. Sometimes they were said to provide care one or two days per week, with children attending formal care at other times (as discussed previously). For those working non-standard hours, informal carers were sometimes used to provide care outside the operating hours of child care or school. As the above example shows, this informal care can also involve providing help getting children to or from school or day care at those times parents are not available to do so because of their work commitments. The role of informal care as the “glue” linking parents’ different formal care arrangements has been seen in other research (Skinner & Finch, 2006). Wheelock and Jones (2002) highlighted the value of informal care in providing flexibility to match variable shift-work patterns of parents, and also, to provide care to children before and after the school day. Their study, which captured parent and informal carer perspectives on informal care, stressed also the need for the carers to be flexible, referring to the whole child care solution as a “jigsaw”.

Within the FCCS sample, especially in the families of nurses and police officers, informal care was often seen to be the only option, given that child care centres generally did not match the work hours of those working non-standard or varying hours. For example, the policewoman quoted below had trouble finding suitable child care that was flexible enough to fit with a rotating roster, with non-standard hours. While she had some success with FDC, she had not found one that completely met her need for both flexible and non-standard hours. She had been able to use that care arrangement for weekends, but not at other times:

16 Their study also illustrated the lack of access to family friendly work arrangements for these carers. While increasingly governments appear to be extending rights-to-request flexibility at work to all, most of the work–family policies that governments have in place are there for parents of young children, not for other carers (Baxter & Renda, 2016).
So, yes, I have to call in favours from family and friends constantly, and it's just not the right lifestyle for a little 2 year old to be just toing and froing from everywhere because there's nothing available. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

In one couple family in the FCCS, with a baby aged 20 months in child care and two school-aged children, the parents worked complementary shifts as police officers. Their shift work meant there were times care was needed for their baby when the child care centre was not open. Talking about how else they managed, the mother said:

- We have one family friend that looks after her. So that's lucky, but both my husband and I, our mums have passed away. So we really haven't got grandparents around for her … I've also got people from my mothers' group. But, you know, everyone's gone back to work and working different days. So you don't want to burden them with another child because they've got their own to look after. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

The reliance on informal care by parents in the FCCS is consistent with other Australian research on nursing (Nowak et al., 2013), as well as international research on other sectors. Backett-Milburn, Airey, McKie, and Hogg (2008), for example, researched child care among mothers working in retail, reporting that the employment of some of these mothers was only viable because of access to informal care, with their low wages and potentially high child care costs contributing to their inability to use formal care (along with issues related to irregular work schedules during non-standard hours).

Research shows that informal care is attractive to parents for a number of reasons, including the flexibility, cost and feelings of safety and trust that accompany the use of family-based care (Skinner & Finch, 2006; Wheelock & Jones, 2002). As such, informal (grandparent) care is often viewed as positive—as the “next best thing” to parental care (Wheelock & Jones, 2002). Some parents therefore may elect to use informal care, even if formal care options are available.

Within the FCCS, most parents using grandparent care spoke warmly of this care, in terms of relationships between grandparents and their child(ren), or perceptions that children and/or grandparents enjoyed this time together. For those regularly using grandparent care, there was often an element of convenience related to their living somewhat close by. (In contrast, those without grandparents living close by very often referred to this fact as making their care choices more constrained.)

Parents who relied on friends to provide informal care also tended to speak positively, and with great appreciation, of the availability of this arrangement.

However, even within the above examples, some difficulties with informal care are apparent (see also Skinner & Finch, 2006; Wheelock & Jones, 2002). FCCS participants using informal care often expressed concern for or awareness of the welfare of their informal care provider. This was sometimes related to the perceived health of their carer, especially in the case of more elderly or less healthy grandparents. Another commonly mentioned concern related to the perception of burdening someone else with what is your responsibility. This was particularly noted among those who relied on friends to provide care, but also in relation to grandparents, who might still be working themselves or have other interests that might be pursued if not caring for grandchildren. This police officer, for example, talking about her mother, said:

- She has occasionally looked after them when we've worked nightshift or whatever. And it's not that she doesn't want to, but it's just that I'm very mindful of the fact they're not her children, they're my responsibility, and she works full-time as well so, you know, she doesn't need to be spending her life looking after my kids, you know. Does that make sense? (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

Another police officer working casual shifts called upon her mother when needed, but was not happy doing so:

- So it's just a non-stop rollercoaster of uncertainty for me, really. Of knowing whether I'm going to get to work or not, and knowing whether I'm going to have someone to look after her or, you know, screaming at my mum, "You need to come over and look after her because I'm in trouble". And that's not fair. I never wanted to be that kind of burden. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)
This FCCS respondent noted that she preferred to pay her FDC educator to provide care, rather than calling upon family:

> It's good, except you don't feel guilt like you do with family because, you know, it's her paid position. So you know it's what she's doing for herself, so you don't have that guilt that goes with asking family to do stuff for you all the time. So it's good. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

Beyond feelings of guilt or worry about informal carers, a reality is that these carers might have their own work or other obligations, such that their availability to provide care might not be entirely flexible. Circumstances such as the carers' ill health or travel may also cause difficulties for those relying on this care for work reasons. FCCS participants reported having had these experiences with informal care. The possibility of these occurrences adds stress to those relying on informal care. This police officer, speaking of a family friend who provides regular care of their children in the morning said, for example:

> That's my worry. If she turns around and says she can't do this any more, I don't know what I'll do. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

Another potential downside of informal care is that some informal care providers may not actually provide an environment or program of activities that is engaging to children. For example, while no parents in the FCCS reported that their children were unhappy with their informal carers, a couple of parents spoke of the grandparents as being unable to provide the same range of fun activities that is available elsewhere.

Within the SACS, many of the school-aged children and their younger siblings were in some informal care as well as formal child care (see subsection 5.1).

We did not encounter any examples of families reporting that they had to rely upon poor quality informal care, in either the FCCS or the SACS. (We did have one or two families who used a formal care arrangement they felt was lower quality than they preferred.) Some research—most based in the US and exploring mothers' "welfare-to-work" transitions—has identified poor quality as a potential problem of informal care. In this literature, negative experiences may have been where parents had limited options with child care providers, and had to rely upon a carer who did not engender feelings of safety and trust. In the US, for example, in the case of low-income families with women transitioning from welfare to work, child care choices appear to be more constrained, especially for those working non-standard hours. In such families, reliance on poor quality informal care can be the only option (Scott, London, & Hurst, 2005). It is important to ensure there is an awareness of this as a potential problem, despite there having been no reported instances of this in the FCCS or SAWCS.

Unregulated carers such as nannies are also included under the category of informal care. Some FCCS families (and in the SACS) had used a nanny at some time, or had thought about using one. Cost was clearly an issue here: a number of respondents said they had thought about a nanny or au pair, but had not taken it further as the cost would be prohibitive. Some specifically mentioned that the fact the child care rebate would not apply to this cost made the affordability impossible for them. This was the case for this police officer:

> We have considered the possibility of getting a nanny or au pair because they work hours that suit you. But at least with the government-regulated child care, you get your rebate, which is helpful. Because when you're paying nearly $100 a day in child care, it's almost not worth going to work. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

We discuss this further in Section 6, when talking about the different sorts of flexible child care options parents sought access to.

As indicated here, informal care offers important opportunities for families working non-standard and irregular hours, and the flexibility offered by this care was particularly valued by FCCS respondents.
4.9 Parent-only care

In the statistics presented earlier in subsection 4.2, we saw that many families use parent-only care even when mothers are employed. A number of shift-working parents in the FCCS had work arrangements in place such that they could “tag-team” their care between parents, consistent with the relatively high percentage managing with parent-only care when mothers worked non-standard hours (see Figure 3, page 32). This is also consistent with broader research that indicates parent-only care is more likely when parents work non-standard hours (Baxter, 2014b; Kimmel & Powell, 2006), and with other studies reporting on the child care arrangements of shift workers in Australia (Maher et al., 2008; Nowak et al., 2013). Other research shows that, in the case of parents who are not shift workers, this may be facilitated by parents, usually mothers, working reduced and flexible hours (Baxter, 2013b; Gray, Baxter, & Alexander, 2008).

Interviews with parents in the FCCS indicate that there are two drivers of parent-only care for shift-working families. One is that working shifts can provide opportunities for parent-only care, and is made to work by parents who wish to minimise non-parental care of children. For example:

I’ve used work to our benefits—what I might perceive as a benefit for me—so that it’s either my husband or myself who’s caring for our children at any time. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

The other is that working shifts limits opportunities for non-parental care, since such care is difficult to find that matches parents’ work hours, both in terms of the irregularity of shifts and the times of day that care would be needed. For example, the following respondents (one police officer and one nurse) described parent-only care being the only possible solution given the lack of other child care options:

Part of my part-time agreement is that I don’t work when my husband works, because we don’t have any family to rely on and obviously day care and things like that don’t run into the night. So we could never rely on day care so that’s what we had to do. So sometimes my husband will come off a night shift and I’ll start a day shift. So we swap the kids over in the car at work. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

We don’t use any child care at the moment because we can’t because the only way that I would be able to use child care is if I had somewhere with flexible occasional days … I don’t want to book in for a permanent booking at day care every Monday and not use it every Monday but still have to pay for it … So at the moment I just work weekends, and when my husband works a day shift I can do afternoon, and we just meet at the hospital. He finishes work at 2 and I start at 2.30, and we swap kids there. It’s the only thing we’ve been able to do, so I’m limited in the shifts that I can do because I can’t get occasional care. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

The degree to which parent-only care is a viable (or necessary) solution for families depends upon the work schedules of both of the parents in couple families (see also Nowak et al., 2013). It is more of a necessity in families when both parents work non-standard or irregular hours.

There are some advantages to families in using parent-only care. Specifically, parents can avoid the costs of non-parental care and can be reassured about the quality of care children receive. Further, parent-only care relies upon greater involvement by fathers in the care of children. Research by Pagnan, Lero, and MacDermid Wadsworth (2011) found that parents saw considerable benefits in this arrangement due to these factors. Benefits such as these were also experienced in the FCCS families using parent-only care.

Reliance on parent-only care does have some costs, however. Pagnan et al.’s (2011) research found that parents regretted the loss of time together as a couple, which could leave parents each feeling like they were single parents. This was somewhat apparent in the FCCS sample, although parents in these circumstances also talked about working hard to preserve some family time within their week. They did talk about the complications of juggling their working hours in these circumstances. However, this is not unique to these families, as those with other
caring arrangements similarly often reported juggling arrangements to fit around non-standard or varying hours of work.

Of course, parental care of children is also highly valued by those who make use of non-parental child care, with having time for parental care of children often preserved within their care arrangements. For example, in the following couple family with a 1 year old, this FCCS respondent talked about how they did not intend to increase their child's time in child care when the parent working part-time increases her work hours:

We probably only want to stick to 2 days. Look, I don't want her in all the time, if that's all right. We want to be her primary caregivers, so I don't want her in day care any more than 2 days a week really. We change our life around that. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

### 4.10 School holiday care

Looking after school-aged children in the school holidays can be a challenge for families, who may use formal child care such as school holiday programs, informal child care such as grandparents and friends, or may reduce their own involvement in work to look after children. Or they may use a mix of all these and other arrangements (Baxter, 2014a).

In the SACS, parents were asked what arrangements they used for children in school holidays. Almost all of these families used formal OSHC services during the week, but some of these services did not offer school holiday programs:

I would use the OHSC at school if it offered a program. It is easier for the children to be in this familiar environment, and the quality of care and activities meets our family's standards. It's very difficult to send the kids to an unfamiliar environment during school holidays. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

Some families sometimes relied on family to provide care.

We … don't have any family close. So on holidays sometimes we'd send—go for a holiday with grandma and granddad or he'd go to vacation care. (Mother, single parent, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Other families had arrangements with friends, or the families of their children's friends.

Some families in the FCCS reported experiencing considerable difficulties in school holidays, sometimes with the logistics and sometimes with costs. For example, this nurse, a mother with three children, said:

Holidays, that's really, really hard. Trying to get time off, like everyone wants their time off because they've got children to look after in the holidays. So something more for children during the holidays. Again, it's very expensive to put three children into care all day. Yes, occasionally [we have used vacation care] when I've not been able to get children off to friends or family or hubby or I couldn't get time off. I've had to use it. Yes, but it's way too expensive … But yes, it's a one-off thing. I can't afford to do it everyday so it's, you know, it's a desperation I guess, when you've got no one else to look after them. The other comment that I would make would be during school holidays, vacation care for my children is extremely expensive. During the school holidays I pay $65 each for [child 1] and [child 2] to go to vacation care. So that's $130 a day plus [child 3]'s $115. That's, you know, $245 a day, when I'm only going to work to earn $125. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

However, parents also often noted that they get through somehow, even if there are difficulties.

In the SACS, respondents were asked to score their satisfaction with their school holiday arrangements on a scale from 1 "extremely dissatisfied", to 4 “mixed feelings”, to 7 "extremely satisfied". Overall, 58% of families were very satisfied (scoring 6 or 7) with their school holiday arrangements, and 36% had mixed feelings (scoring 3 to 5), leaving 6% who were dissatisfied (scoring 1 or 2). Among those who scored their school holiday arrangements the lowest, comments about how these arrangements could be improved covered:
the availability of places at specific OSHC services or schools—“I wish there was a holiday program at the school” (mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children);

- costs—“haven’t used it yet, mostly due to the cost” (mother, partnered, school-aged children only);

- the nature of programs offered—“have some more excursions, such as movies, bowling, etc.” (mother, partnered, school-aged children only);

- programs for older children—“supervised care for high school children age 13–15” (mother, single parent, school-aged children only); and

- services for children with special needs—“I could be offered vacation care for my child, on any days of my choosing, like all the other parents, instead of only when there is a carer available and only during the hours allocated to me” (mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children).

Availability at a particular OSHC service was the most common of these issues raised, as illustrated by the following example:

We currently put our kids in a school holiday program at a different school to the one our children attend. While they enjoy the program, they are not familiar with any of the other children at that school. It would be great for [service] to offer a vacation program. Also would suit us better in terms of location and travel time to go to the local school. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

The availability of school holiday care for older children was addressed through one of the trial projects (see Appendix A). This service did not receive sufficient enrolments to allow it to continue, but the views of those we spoke to about the service were positive. For example, we spoke to a mother of a 13-year-old child who had attended the school holiday club and a younger child who attended the vacation care for younger school-aged children. After being initially reluctant to attend, her older child very much enjoyed the activities offered through the school holiday club and being with children his own age:

Once he went a couple of times he was just in it completely. And once I’d got a couple of his mates’ parents to also book them in too, they were all really excited about it and they had an awesome time. (Mother, single parent, school-aged children only)

She spoke of there being a definite advantage to having only the older children there, of it being “a different kind of head space” compared to the vacation care for younger children. She considered that the low take-up was in part related to the cost. While she could afford the fees, given her full-time work, she acknowledged that others may not find this so affordable or perhaps worth the money if children of this age were seen by some parents as being quite able to be without supervision in the school holidays. Regarding cost, she thought parents might not have been aware that the Child Care Benefit (perhaps she meant Rebate) applies to school holiday care, such that parents could claim some of the costs back.

She also thought that some parents did not necessarily perceive it to be important for children at this age to be in structured activities. However, she observed that parents in the local area were often not aware of the program, and she was able to encourage some to take it up by spreading the word about the interesting activities offered. But she noted that it would probably need more marketing to gain more widespread awareness and to encourage greater take-up. She also noted that something like this would take time to be taken up by the community:

Look, it’s like anything. People in this area take an awful long time to take something up, and I don’t know why that is or what it is, but it’s frustrating and annoying when you’re trying to start something. And that’s why so many things fall flat before they actually get any momentum and get up and going. Because the time it takes to get something going up here is difficult. (Mother, single parent, school-aged children only)

She offered some interesting suggestions about marketing this program to the children through media that these children relate to, such as through the creation of YouTube clips of the children participating in the activities.

Not everyone in the SACS talked of difficulties with school holiday care, and some referred to the high standard of the vacation care programs they had available to them. This was true also
within the FCCS, and some respondents in these interviews also referred to their FDC educator providing care in school holidays.

Parents often organise their school holidays to take time off work, either altogether as a family, or taking turns to be at home with the children. According to the SACS, 45% of mothers and 31% of fathers took paid leave in school holidays to care for their children. Also, 23% of mothers and 9% of fathers took unpaid leave or reduced their work hours. In the FCCS, parents also talked about taking time off in the holidays to spend time with their children. (See also Baxter (2014a) for analyses of parental care of children in school holidays using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children.)

### 4.11 Summary and final remarks

Australian families manage their child care arrangements in varied ways, reflecting different needs for child care dictated by parents' perceptions of what is best for their children, parents' employment arrangements, and the availability of different care options. These arrangements, of course, are susceptible to change, as children's growth in itself causes parents to re-think child care. Other changes in employment or family circumstances can also contribute to a need for change.

A challenge for research is determining to what extent families' child care (or employment) arrangements are constrained by the lack of availability of suitable care arrangements. In the FCCS a number of families used only informal care or parent-only care for their children. Some indicated that these were their preferred arrangements, despite challenges in making them work. Others indicated that they were constrained to these options, especially shift-working families, who were unable to locate formal child care that met their needs for care at varying or non-standard hours. As was discussed in Section 3, families often had manipulated their employment arrangements to fit with their options for child care.

Many families, then, had some sort of solution that allowed them to engage in employment, whether that was parent-only care, informal care, formal care, or a combination of arrangements. All forms of care were valued by families, with families overall looking for child care that provided an environment that was seen to be good for their children, and within which their children were happy and given opportunities to develop relationships and skills. Different families favoured particular types of care, and this varied too according to children's ages, highlighting the need for a range of care options to be available.

There was certainly evidence from within the FCCS and the SACS of some parents being unable to access the formal child care they wanted. For some this was a matter of availability within a local service (such as OSHC or FDC having no places available locally). For others, particularly shift-working families, it related to the lack of availability of care during non-standard hours or that could be booked as needed to match parents' rosters. These parents were in most need of “flexible” child care. Some parents were able to access flexible care through centre-based care, but this was not common. It was more common for parents to be able to access flexible care through FDC, but it was still not guaranteed with this service.

Many families in the FCCS found that informal care providers were able to provide the flexible care they needed (or at least some of it), and this care was highly valued by parents. In fact, informal care is not only used because of its flexibility. Regardless of parental employment arrangements, some parents like to have extended family members care for their children rather than have them cared for in a centre or with people they do not know. However, many parents were often not entirely comfortable relying on this care. Parents expressed concerns about being an imposition on others, and also had concerns about the health and wellbeing of those providing care, especially when this was an elderly relative, such as a grandparent. An alternative informal care type is nanny care, and while a number of families had considered using this care, it was only used by a few. The main barrier to its use was cost.

While families valued informal care, especially as provided by extended family, it would be problematic to assume that all families have access to this form of care, and to assume it works

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17 Percentages are calculated over all families, including single-parent families.
well for everyone. It would also be problematic to assume that families would be willing to substitute informal for formal care, even if a high quality formal care option was available to them, given some having a preference for care provided by family and friends. This may be especially so for care at specific times of the day or week (e.g., overnight or weekends), when it might be perceived that informal options are preferable to centre-based ones. The cost of formal care also may be a factor for some who have access to free informal care.

For shift workers—and also for parents who do not work shifts but work long days or start early or finish late—difficulties in finding care that fits with their work hours were sometimes expressed. Parents often talked about having to adjust their employment in some way because of the lack of child care that suited what they needed (see Section 3). Commonly, parents who had insufficient or unstable care arrangements reported that managing their child care arrangements was difficult, and reported feeling stress and anxiety as a result. Sometimes these difficulties were associated with affordability concerns. Most often, though, within the FCCS and the SACS, the difficulties parents talked about related to the qualities of child care that we have been exploring in this report—that of getting access to “flexible care”; that is, care during non-standard hours, care to match variable rosters, and occasional care that might be used for short notice or to cover short periods of time. We return to summarise what parents said about their needs for these aspects of care in Section 6.
Thinking about Emlen’s (2010) discussion about parents’ demand for flexibility in their lives, when families have less flexibility in their home life, they may require more flexibility in their child care, especially if their employment also offers little flexibility.

This section highlights the family and child characteristics that might have an influence on the degree to which families need more access to flexibility in child care (or in work). The factors described here are those that this research revealed, which are consistent with those described in the child care literature (Brandon & Hofferth, 2003; Peyton et al., 2001; Riley & Glass, 2002; Tang, Coley, & Votruba-Drzal, 2012). In particular, we find that families most likely to have difficulties in managing their work and care responsibilities are single-parent families, families with relatively little family support, families living in areas that have limited formal child care and in areas that pose other challenges such as long commutes, and families with sick children or children with special needs. We also describe a difficulty that many families encounter—finding care for children of multiple ages.

While it might also be relevant to discuss difficulties for low-income families or other vulnerable groups, we did not have a high representation of such families within our data, nor did we specifically capture information about financial wellbeing or income that allowed us to explore this in detail. Clearly, understanding how child care constraints might pose particular challenges for vulnerable families’ engagement in paid work is a topic that should be explored further.

5.1 Single and separated parents

We have seen in Section 4 that in couple families, parents working non-standard or variable hours very often take turns to look after children, also sometimes being able to negotiate complementary shifts to ensure this can happen. This strategy cannot work in the same way for single-parent families, and our interviews with single parents highlighted the difficulties they faced in trying to match their work and child care situations in the absence of a partner to share this responsibility.

A respondent in the SACS described how she had to leave her prior job because the associated child care demands could not be met:

I had to leave my last job of 14 years when I became a single parent as that job was 24/7 emergency service shift work on a rotating roster with no pattern … There are no child care centres open on public holidays, weekends or after hours. I now work full-time, [and earn] less money, spending more time away from my child. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

Difficulties with child care can have flow-on effects for employment opportunities (as discussed in Section 3). While this is true for all parents, the inability to share the care of children with another resident parent can mean single parents have less flexibility in how they manage the care of children. One single mother discussed how she had trouble getting permanent employment, because she could not commit to working the variable hours required of such a job. In a competitive employment environment, she felt that her opportunities were limited, given she did not have the flexibility in caring for children (and therefore availability for work) that others had. Speaking of opportunities for permanent work, she said:
I wanted to get permanent work rather than a casual but I’m restricted because I can’t do the shift work because of the child care … It doesn’t matter whether you’re good or not. It’s more a case of how flexible you are. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

Single parents may, of course, be sharing the care of children, to different degrees, with another parent who lives elsewhere. Some parents in the FCCS talked about making use of those arrangements to spend more time in paid work when children were with the other parent. One issue raised by parents in these circumstances was that child care bookings could not take account of week-on week-off sharing arrangements. Such arrangements may also affect couple families in which a child or children have a parent living elsewhere. For example, talking about her children living with the other parent part of the time, this respondent said:

Outside school hours care is an every day or on a permanent basis, but week-on week-off, we would have to pay for. If they were going to be there all week, one week, we would still have to pay for them to be there all the next week even if they weren’t going to be. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

5.2 Extended family support

Just as single parents do not have the help of a resident partner, many families in the FCCS sample who were living away from extended family noted their lack of family support when discussing their child care arrangements. Being without local family support posed considerable challenges for some families. This was often expressed as an issue by police officers who had been transferred to a regional police station, away from family support:

People are lucky if they’ve got family and friends to look after their child or rely back on grandparents or things like that. But we, unfortunately, don’t have that. It makes it a bit more difficult for us to arrange child care and things like that, but we manage with the situation we’ve been put in, and I think it’s working for us at the moment. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Those who had extended family support very much appreciated the help this gave them. For example:

You know, it would’ve been very, very difficult to manage without a family member close by, you know. So I suppose, well, day care centres are only open till 6 pm, so after that you’re sort of stuck aren’t you? … If people like me didn’t have their family close by, I don’t know what you could do. You wouldn’t be able to work. (Mother, single parent, school-aged children only)

5.3 Location

Living in regional centres and small towns posed particular challenges for those without local networks of family and friends, as these towns were often limited in their supply of formal child care. (This has similarly been noted in other Australian research on child care in regional communities – see Harris, 2008.) For example, a single parent working at a police station in a small country town had a live-in nanny for his children. When asked whether he considered other child care arrangements, he answered:

Well, I can’t, because nothing is open in the afternoon and nothing is open at night time, and I’m living in a small country town that has mobile child care twice a week and it’s only for about 6 hours at a time … But, no, I’m in a lucky situation where I can afford it. If I still had to pay off my mortgage and things like that I might not be able to afford it. (Father, single parent, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

As he identified, the financial implications of this mean it is not a solution available to everyone.

A number of nurses and police in the FCCS sample mentioned their long commuting time, which had significant implications for their organisation of child care. Such commutes were not always associated with living in a small or regional centre, as some employees living in metropolitan areas lived some distance from their workplace (in particular, nurses).
Through the FCCS we did hear, in fact, of parents moving into a particular location that would ensure they had convenient access to a child care program that was known to be of a very high quality.

5.4 Sick children

Baxter (2014b) analysed HILDA survey data to explore the difficulties parents had had with work-related child care in the previous 12 months. Of all the listed difficulties, finding care for a sick child was the one most likely to have caused problems. Parents’ ratings of difficulties on this item (with an original scale of 0 “no difficulties”, to 10 “very difficult”) were grouped into categories of “no difficulties” (0–3), “some difficulties” (4–6) and “more difficulties” (7–10). Across all parents who had used or thought about using child care in the previous 12 months, 47% had no difficulties finding care for a sick child, 15% had some difficulties and 29% had more difficulties. Another 10% said “not applicable”.

Likewise, parents in the FCCS and SACS talked about difficulties they faced managing work when children were sick. For example:

If kids are sick we are stuffed. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

I travel occasionally, so if kids are sick we need to be able to book care at short notice (Father, partnered, school-aged children only)

Being in my own business, I find it hard to take time off during school holidays or when the kids are sick. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

The strategies parents mentioned when children were sick included working from home and taking leave. Mothers and fathers were reported to do these in order to manage the care of sick children.

5.5 Children with special needs

Australian and international evidence highlights that finding care for children with special health care needs or with behavioural issues that require particular attention can be especially difficult. In these situations, children may need specially trained, dedicated staff and/or additional equipment or environmental needs. Further, regulations about eligibility to attend certain services might preclude these children’s attendance, creating barriers to parents’ employment. We heard of this through a few parents in the SACS. For example:

We have a 10-year-old son with severe autism and it is extremely difficult to organise after-school care for him. We would like to have access to more carers willing to care for children with special needs. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

I am unable to work during any school holidays as my child [with an intellectual disability] is not able to attend vacation care until the age of 12. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

The parent cited above also says, in regard to possible improvements to school term-time arrangements:

I would love to see care offered to children with an intellectual disability, and billed out the same way with [Child Care Benefit] offered to parents. Rather than parents having to use respite hours available and provide a one-to-one carer to attend with the child, which does create a feeling of exclusion rather than inclusion with the other children (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Two parents in the FCCS had children with special needs who were attending the service at which school holiday care was being trialled (see Appendix A). Their stories accentuated the difficulties these families faced, given their needs for specialised child care. These parents both talked of a number of problems they faced, one being the limited availability of care for children with special needs. For example, this mother with two children with special needs said:
And, I mean, [mainstream] child care is so much more widespread. You know, like every local school has their vacation care program and there’s child care like everywhere, right, but they have not the slightest chance of being able to manage a child with severe disabilities so we can’t attend any of those. But [child] needs super-specialised one-on-one care which, you know, is not provided at general child care. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

While these parents reported that they had some options for respite care that could sometimes be used instead of child care, this respite care had limited availability and was quite inflexible. There is also the issue of distance to services and transport. As schools and associated care for children with special needs are more sparsely available than mainstream schools, parents may have to travel some distance to transport their children there. While some families may be able to access subsidised transport for their children to and from school, if this is not available (such as in school holidays), this may be a barrier to parents taking up that care. Further, just as for parents generally, the cost of care can be an issue, especially in families with multiple children.

These barriers around cost and transport may have contributed to the low enrolment rates in the school holiday program trialled through the trials. In the FCCS, we had two participants (mothers) of children attending the school involved in this trial. However, neither of these families had made use of vacation care for their child or children with special needs. While they liked the idea of this program, and spoke favourably of how their children would enjoy and benefit from such a program, they each experienced constraints in using it. For both, transport was a problem. During the school term, their children are able to access government-funded transport to and from school, which they relied on given the distance from their homes to the school. Without this transport being available for the vacation care program, attendance at the program was not viable. This was the key constraint on use for one of the parents in the FCCS. For the other parent in the FCCS, it was also about cost, as she had two children with special needs, but only one whom the program would have suited. (The severe special care needs of the other child meant that the more realistic options for her were to remain at home to care for both children herself, or to have child care provided to the two children in her home.)

Although a number of issues emerged from the data collected in this research, to comprehensively explore the flexible care needs for families of children with special needs, a focused study is possibly needed. Here we have just highlighted some insights from the few parents in this situation who participated in the research. These families’ situations are more complex than has been described here, with the parents’ stories also revealing that children’s special needs have had direct consequences for mothers’ and fathers’ engagement in paid work.

### 5.6 Families with children of different ages

In subsection 4.1, we discussed how child care needs vary with children’s age. A consequence of this, evident through the FCCS and the SACS, is that having more than one child can lead to difficulties if they have different care (preschool or school) arrangements. Transporting children to and from these different arrangements is one factor. Having a child in early childhood education (preschool or kindergarten), with its more rigid scheduling compared to that of child care, poses its own challenges in this respect, especially if parents are employed (see page 33). Also, different opening and closing hours of LDC compared to OSHC (which is not always available before school) make drop-offs to and pick-ups from care problematic. For example, one married nurse from the FCCS, with a 6 year old and an 8 year old, reflected on when only one child was in school:

> When one was in school and the other one was still in child care, it was just the logistics of it—getting them both to their centres before I had to start work. It wasn’t too bad picking them up because I had the time, but it’s just getting them both to their centres and getting to work on time, and it feels like you’ve just done a marathon before work, before you’ve even started. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

This FCCS nurse, with three children, one under school age, wanted to see opening hours of before-school care extended to align with care for younger children, for which she could access care from 6 am:
I would just say that with regard to before- and after-school care, that they should have the option there of 6 o’clock starts as well, rather than 6.30. Because, you know, it’s very hard to organise with three kids when you’ve got to stagger their drop-off. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Families in the FCCS with multiple children and using FDC also had difficulties in finding an educator who had the capacity to take on all of their children at one time. For example, the following police officer had three children under school age. One child was in preschool, and the younger children (twins) attended FDC on the preschool days, but on the other days, when she needed care for all three children, she was not able to find it. She said:

Having a multiple birth, and another under-school-age child, to try and get them into the same place, it’s just a nightmare! (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only).

Things may be even more complicated when one or more of the children have special needs that need to be accommodated (see subsection 5.5).

5.7 Summary

It was apparent from this research that some families faced more difficulties than others in finding child care solutions that fit with their work arrangements, including single-parent families, parents living away from extended families (such as in regional areas), others living in regional areas or particular locations where supply of care was limited, and families in which child care needs were more demanding due to having children with special health care needs or multiple children.

However, we note that neither of these samples, the FCCS or the SACS, were representative of the Australian population of parents, and so we have likely not represented the views of all groups with relatively high needs for flexible care. In particular, while the FCCS is largely a sample of parents working non-standard hours, the focus on police and nurses means that our sample does not include many families who are vulnerable, or of low socio-economic status. No doubt, a broader study of flexible child care needs among Australian families would be of value to explore whether constraints in the availability of flexible child care are evident in other population groups.
Chapter 6

This section brings together the views of parents across the FCCS and SACS to highlight common themes that emerged in regard to how parents want their child care flexibility needs to be met.

6.1 Greater availability of high quality child care options

A constraint felt by a number of families in the study was related to their inability to access the formal child care they needed. Parents talked about placing children’s names on waiting lists for LDC and FDC, and about constraints in the availability of OSHC. It is not surprising, then, that some parents voiced their wish for more child care to be available:

I think the big issue is that we need more places and more child care centres. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

I think it’s important to have more places available. And I think that wages for carers probably needs to be looked at, and let it be treated a bit more like a profession. (Mother, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

I think they need more places. Every year at the school they struggle to get all of the new prep kids that need to get into the before- and after-school care in. And they don’t know what to do in the end if they can’t get their kids in. They have to find some other alternative arrangements. And all the schools are the same. Some schools only have before-school care and no after-school care or vice versa, and some schools start later at 7.30, which is not very suitable to all parents either. So, I don’t know, I think more and more parents are working out of necessity or whatever, and the government wants more and more people to work to keep the country running, so I think they need to expand their before- and after-school and day care places so that as many kids as possible can get in. (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

Of course, within the context of this research and the nature of the parents participating in the interviews, many sought for this care to be better suited to shift-working families, as discussed in the subsections below.

Access to more formal care was sought by many parents, including those who had no informal care options available to them, and those who had less flexibility in their work arrangements. Further, regardless of work arrangements, formal care was increasingly sought by parents as their children grew through the preschool years, when child care was seen to provide important opportunities for development and socialisation.

Overall, parents were generally very satisfied with the quality of care options that were available to them. In the FCCS there were just a couple of exceptions, with parents noting aspects of the care (such as cleanliness of the home) that they were less than satisfied with. However, these parents had elected to use these services because of other features of that care that they appreciated (in particular, the flexibility). We similarly saw in parents’ ratings of their school-aged care that they were generally satisfied with this care, even if they offered suggestions for improvement, and rated some aspects of the care more highly than others. It was apparent that parents did judge the quality of the care when talking about their work and care choices. It
was noted, for example, by one of those parents who did not rate her care provider as being of high quality, that she had to use this provider because she had no other options. To get the flexibility she needed, she had to compromise on quality. While we saw few examples of this in these data, this is typical of the research on the welfare-to-work experiences of mothers in the US, and so it is legitimate to guard against the care options in Australia placing families, especially disadvantaged or vulnerable families, in situations where they would feel their only options are ones of inferior quality.

In terms of specific types of care, some parents valued and preferred FDC. Shift-working families who had a “flexible” FDC educator very much valued this care, whether or not that was arranged through the trials. Others sought more flexibility in FDC, as not all FDC educators were able to provide care for those working variable or non-standard hours. The trials aimed to provide FDC for parents who worked these hours, but it proved difficult to match parents to educators who could provide care for the hours needed, given the necessity of care being available within a localised area. An additional challenge for some families was finding care for multiple children. Outside of the trials, parents talked about being unable to use FDC because of long waiting lists. Also, parents mentioned that they had not gone ahead with FDC because, like centre-based care, they were required to book in set days of care.

Many parents valued the quality of centre-based care, and so often used this in conjunction with some informal care to meet their child care needs. The lack of flexibility in most child care centres was an issue, as was the cost. Nevertheless, parents generally valued the quality of this care and the stability it offered them and their children.

Some respondents thought that workplace child care could be a good option for them. This was imagined as providing the qualities of centre-based formal care, but with the flexibility to be used like occasional care, 24 hours per day. As stated by one nurse, in addition to the flexibility that workplace child care would give, it would save on travel costs and time:

The only way that it could possibly improve would be if there was care available on the hospital grounds, or attached to the hospital grounds … It would cut out a lot of travel expenses and time if care was available at the hospital. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

That parents sought different forms of formal care is relevant also in that it is important that a range of child care options be available to parents so they can choose that which suits them and their children. This in itself provides more flexibility to parents, as discussed by the following respondent, who noted that care with different qualities should be available to families:

So, you know, maybe the government could consider a few options like, you know, flexible child care, where it’s open at different times 24 hours pretty much. And then maybe have another system set up like many that’s affordable, you know, for families to actually use, that can come to the house at night for older kids like my son, who’ll go to school next year. And then that won’t have an impact on their life. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

In fact, while parents often expressed their wish for more formal care, many parents preferred that their children were only cared for by themselves or by extended family members. Some had altered their work arrangements to ensure child care arrangements could work with these informal or family-based options.

6.2 Extended hours of care

Many of the respondents in the FCCS and the SACS noted having difficulties with the hours that child care is available. Such comments were most often made with respect to child care centres, including OSHC. However, these comments also applied to FDC, given that FDC educators are not all available to provide care outside of standard hours.

We heard often of the difficulties respondents faced when opening hours did not quite match work hours, and this was especially so in the mornings, when parents of multiple children also had problems with LDC hours being incompatible with before-school care opening hours. Some parents were conflicted about the use of early morning child care, given concerns over
waking children early in the morning, and so preferred alternate arrangements (such as in-home carers) for the mornings. Others, however, needed this formal care and struggled with their existing arrangements—juggling care between themselves, calling upon others for help, or adjusting their start time at work.

At the end of the day, parents likewise struggled if their formal care closed at a time that was earlier than they preferred. Some, for example, talked about centres closing at 6 pm, which parents often reported as difficult to work with. Getting to children by closing time was sometimes associated with significant stress (and a subsequent financial penalty for some when late). This was especially so for those with less flexibility in their work finishing times, or those whose jobs were subject to unexpected overtime, such as was the case for some emergency services and health care workers.

There were marked differences across families in the degree to which these care hours were seen to be problematic, depending on the work schedules and flexibility of each parent, along with the commute times from work to the child care centre.

The trialled LDC extended opening hours proved helpful for those who made use of those additional hours. However, take-up was low for the service that required pre-booking and had extra costs for the additional time. The take-up may have been affected by these conditions, or may reflect a lower demand among clients at this service.

With regard to more extended hours of care, parents in this research offered views about using overnight care. Some used it already, having children cared for overnight by grandparents or FDC educators. Some thought the idea of using overnight care was perfectly reasonable, and they would use it, were it available to them. Others were more reticent about overnight care, citing their preference to have children at home and with family overnight.

Generally, when parents were asked about the sort of care they would like to see, many said that 24/7 care would be ideal. However, if offered through a centre, the reality of how this would work, and how much it would be used was not so clear. Many parents may still prefer to juggle the care between themselves to allow this care to be provided at home by themselves or family. As this police officer states:

Well, in an ideal world child care would run 24 hours wouldn’t it? Then again, most parents aren’t going to be stoked about the idea of taking their kid in there in the middle of night to drop them off for 8 hours, so I don’t know where the answer is. (Father, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

There was some demand for children to stay with an FDC educator overnight. When parents had this available to them, it seems to have been a good solution and the parents reported that this works well for both parents and children. In-home carers were seen as possibly being a good solution for some families requiring 24-hour or overnight care (see in-home carers, below).

6.3 Weekend care

A specific form of non-standard hours care that parents referred to was weekend care. A number of families said that they had difficulties with (or had to avoid) work on weekends, given that there are no formal care arrangements available.

Many shift-working parents in the FCCS worked weekends. These interviews revealed that some families with children in FDC used that care on weekends but, mostly, parents used informal care or shared the care between themselves at this time. Single parents did not always have the option of sharing the care of children with another parent and, for them, weekend work tended to mean calling upon the help of other family and friends. Within the SACS, among parents working weekends, very few reported using any formal child care. Generally, when child care was used on weekends, grandparents and friends were called upon to help.

The low numbers of families using child care on weekends may reflect a lack of availability of formal care options on those days. However, it is not clear to what extent families would shift from informal to formal care on weekends, were it available, as parents also expressed that
they valued children being in some informal care, to give them time in a less formal or family environment.

One of the trialled projects specifically focused on weekend child care, but had little take-up of this form of care (see Appendix A). This parent reflected on why she thought the take-up had not been there, given the large parent base, and the considerable effort by this service to spread this information to local businesses. She considered the low take-up to be related to parents already having arrangements in place and, also, that couple parents often have someone available to look after the children:

But, I think, why would you pay, you know, quite a decent amount of money when you've already got someone organised. I think that's the problem. And I guess on weekends you've got the issue—I'm a single parent but most people aren't single, do you know? So one parent will be working and one will be at home. So, I mean, the requirement is probably less than you expect, but it's still there. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

Some of the demand for weekend care was expressed as being “just in case” it was needed:

I think maybe a Saturday, you know, it possibly could come in handy … if I needed to help my husband out at business or something, but it wouldn't be a regular thing … An ad hoc thing, a one-off here and there. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

For shift-working parents who shared the care between themselves, there were also times on weekends, as with weekday time, that these parents sought some occasional child care to help them out with overlapping schedules.

6.4 Nannies or in-home carers

Very few parents in this research had any experience of using a nanny or an in-home carer, but several talked about having looked into this option, or having thought about it.

Families who seemed to be considering this service were those who had been unable to find an acceptable care solution, and were at the time relying on informal carers or juggling the care of children around their work responsibilities. Those with especially difficult work situations (such as where both parents in couple families are working unstable or non-standard hours) were likely to have thought about a nanny or in-home carer. For example, this was the ideal arrangement for one family:

I suppose it's not really achievable to have someone go to every person's house, but for me that's the only solution that I can see to be able to keep the kids in their normal lifestyle … I mean, my husband and I signed up to be shift workers, not them. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Single parents, families with a number of children, and those living in areas with limited formal care options also saw this as being a solution for them. One police officer, a mother with a police officer husband and three under-school-age children who did not at the time have any formal care arrangements because previous arrangements were not working, said:

I'd just like there to be a service—and I guess there is, the nannying service—where you can ring and book a nanny, but that type of service is so expensive. A type of family, in-home service where it's a reasonable price and people will come 24 hours a day to be with the kids … An in-home service for emergency service workers would be better, because the children have more stability and they have everything they need if the parent cannot get there on time. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

Her difficulties in finding appropriate formal child care were largely related to her inability to find an FDC place that could accommodate her three children.

The perceived cost of having a nanny or in-home carer was the barrier that prohibited most parents from pursuing this form of care. Some went so far as to comment that the cost was especially prohibitive given that they would not be able to access the child care rebate for this expense.
Some had looked into (or had past experience of) the “in-home care” program, but were not receiving care through this program at the time of their interview, having been advised that there were no appropriate carers available.

While some parents expressed worries about having a stranger in the home, others were comfortable with this as an option, assuming such carers were appropriately vetted.

### 6.5 More flexible care, including occasional care

Parents in the FCCS generally wanted access to more “flexible” care. At times this meant care during non-standard hours (discussed above), but at other times this meant having access to care with some flexibility in bookings. This was a significant issue for families with parents who worked rotating or irregular rosters, who found the need to make permanent and regular bookings with child care did not fit well with the nature of their work schedules. Some found that the only way they could manage was to have set bookings in child care to cover all their possible needs, given that was the only option available to them, but this meant they paid for more child care than they used (or wanted to use).

Families who had access to flexible care, largely through FDC in the FCCS, found this helped them enormously in managing their work and family commitments. This was especially so compared to families who juggled a number of different care providers in order to meet their care needs.

Parents without the ability to access “flexible” bookings of care, then, often expressed a wish for access to care that could accommodate changes to bookings without significant financial penalty. This included having access to care with some capacity to add days of care, if needed. For example:

- Having the flexibility to add casual days when I need it for work. I have three children, and it is difficult to get a spot for them all. And it is difficult to send them to a friend's house, as there are too many children to fit into the friend's car to get all the children to school. So care is my best option. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

- A little more flexibility would be great, when you might require an extra morning or afternoon due to work requirements, on short-term basis. Also, occasional Saturday care would assist with Saturday work roster. (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

- Flexi days to work around rosters. I want my child home when I'm home, but can't get casual days, so have to pay for care even when it's not required. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Parents often could not access additional care, especially if they relied upon care through an LDC centre or through OSHC, due to those services being unable to take on more children. One father in the FCCS, a police officer, wanted this flexibility, but understood that meeting such a demand for child care might be challenging for providers. When asked what he wants in child care, he said:

- More flexibility in terms of holding your spot, but then also having the ability to either add a couple of days or drop a couple of days. I don't know how that would work as a business model, but that'll definitely be more convenient. (Father, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

Some parents in the FCCS avoided using formal care altogether, relying on only themselves to care for their children, getting help from informal carers, or limiting their paid work involvement, because they could not access formal care to match their variable roster. For example:

- We don’t use any child care at the moment because we can’t. Because the only way that I would be able to use child care is if I had somewhere with flexible occasional days … I don't want to book in for a permanent booking at day care every Monday and not use it every Monday but still have to pay for it. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Further, a commonly expressed wish by families in the FCCS was for more access to child care that could be booked on a casual basis for short sessions of use. This was often discussed in the
Flexible child care and Australian parents' work and care decision-making

How parents want their flexibility needs to be met

Shift-working families, who sometimes faced just short periods in the day when the overlap of their shifts meant neither parent was able to care for their children. Some parents used informal carers to fill this gap, while others had to use and pay for whole days of care (or sessions, for OSHC), regardless of how much time their children were in that care. Some parents talked about the benefits of FDC in this regard, in being able to pay for the number of hours required, rather than having to pay for a full day. For example, one police officer in the FCCS talked about what he would like to have access to:

Maybe drop them off at 6 am and then they get picked up at 8.30 in the morning. It's just somewhere where they can hang out basically while we're doing a transition. Mum's going to work and I'm coming home, and whatever. (Father, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

Many families talked about this change-over of shifts as being a really difficult and stressful time for them. For some, this was made worse if one parents' finish time was somewhat unreliable (as could happen with some emergency service and health workers).

6.6 Affordable flexible care

As discussed in subsection 4.4, some parents felt the cost of formal child care needed addressing. Parents often talked about how little they gained financially from working once their child care costs were taken into account. When we asked parents what the government should know about child care for shift-working families, it was commonly expressed that the cost was too high.

There were some specific issues related to costs that parents raised. One concerned the effects of accruing too many absences, and thus being ineligible for Child Care Benefit for all their child care costs. This came about for families who had set bookings for child care to ensure they had care in place to cover different possibilities with shift rosters, but who then did not use all those set days in care. Another issue raised was parents' dissatisfaction with having to pay for child care for public holidays, when that care was not actually available. This was a problem for shift workers who might actually be working those public holidays.

Related to this are parents' views about paying for care when it was not used; for example, because of children's sickness or because of a change in a shift roster. Several parents understood, however, that these circumstances could not be simply addressed by expecting to pay nothing on these days. For example, this FCCS police officer said:

Because, you know, it's not cheap. So it's one thing that I would love to see. And I also understand that the educators need a reliable income, but it'd be great to see at least something like a reduced amount that we have to pay when the kids actually aren't there. (Father, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Parents did also express appreciation of the government assistance that is currently available, and those with high levels of assistance tended to consider their child care costs to be quite affordable. Clearly, the perception of affordability is a relative one for parents, with some parents saying that while child care costs are high, they are manageable for their family, given their income. Some families we spoke with had, however, reduced their involvement in paid work or delayed return to paid work, in order to minimise the costs associated with formal child care.

6.7 School holiday care

Many parents discussed school holiday care. Parents sought access to more school holiday care, to more affordable school holiday care, and to more variety in the programs offered. For details, refer to subsection 4.10.
6.8 Additional services or improved quality within child care

Putting aside issues of availability of care, most parents in the FCCS and SACS who had access to child care considered their options to be of a high quality. As a result, there were not many comments from parents concerning the ways in which their service could be improved. Issues of availability of care were relevant, however, in that some parents felt constrained in their child care choices, and as a result felt their only option was to use a child care service that in some way did not meet the standard of care they wished to use. This did not apply to many parents in the FCCS or SACS and, usually, parents were unhappy with a particular aspect of the service but were happy with other aspects, such as the flexibility offered.

Thinking specifically about flexibility, beyond hours and costs of care, there were some suggestions in the FCCS and the SACS that it would be helpful if the services provided meals, and for school-aged children, some structure for ensuring the children did their homework. However, some parents were concerned that such additional services would mean higher costs.

One of the LDC services trialled some extra services that provided opportunities for parents to meet each other, and to spend more time with staff. The availability of a coffee van and a pizza van at different services was seen to be positive in providing opportunities to build these connections.

6.9 Special awareness of emergency service workers

Some FCCS participants who worked in emergency services strongly expressed a wish that the government consider the importance of the work that they are doing, and provide adequate child care services to enable them to fulfil their employment requirements, free of worry over how their child care needs would be met.

6.10 Better flexibility in the workplace

Despite parents talking of complex “juggling” of work and child care, there were some parents in the FCCS and SACS who sought no changes to their current arrangements for child care. Instead, they wanted more flexibility in the workplace. We heard this especially from FCCS parents with less say over their shifts, inflexible work hours, or particular constraints at home, such as being a single parent or having a partner who also works shifts.

6.11 Final remarks

As indicated by the range of suggestions above, parents were quite diverse in what they sought from child care (or work), in order to meet their needs. These views were synthesised from those of the parents participating in this research, through the SACS or the FCCS. From the FCCS, we have a large representation of parents working non-standard hours (as police and nurses), and so the suggestions for more flexible child care options, including non-standard or variable hours of care, relate particularly to their demands for this form of care.

It is important to note that neither the SACS or the FCCS samples were representative of the Australian population. For shift-working families, we have little information from those working in lower status jobs, and the extent to which their child care demands may differ from those of parents in our studies remains unknown. Further, as we identified in Section 3, a majority of mothers in Australia actually do not work outside standard hours, and their current child care options may be sufficient. Gaining greater insights into parents’ demands for more flexible child care really needs to be explored from a broader sample of parents than was possible with this research.
While we cannot generalise from the findings of this research to the broader population, the insights offered above on the different characteristics of care sought by parents are not surprising, being consistent, for example, with the sorts of views expressed in submissions to the Productivity Commission on Child Care and Early Childhood Education. What remains to be tested is the extent to which these wishes or demands for different forms of care are found across different groups in the population.

Further, in this section we have presented what parents told us about the nature of the child care they sought. An important question, though, is whether parents would actually take up different forms of care, rather than wishing it was in place as a back-up, just in case other arrangements were not available. This is especially important in determining the financial viability of introducing new or changed models of child care.

The research highlighted that even among shift-working families, who generally are likely to have a relatively high demand for flexible child care, there were many who found their own solutions to child care, within their immediate or extended family, or through friends. While some did this because their child care options were constrained, given the nature of their work hours, others expressed satisfaction with their care arrangements, despite the related stress. It is important that this is recognised, as this indicates that parents working non-standard hours are not all seeking more flexible care options.

The purpose of this report was to answer the following questions:

- What flexible child care arrangements are families seeking to meet their needs, and are those arrangements currently available?
- What are barriers to families accessing different models of flexible care?

The findings from this research are summarised against these questions, below, with related Australian and international literature also referenced. This is followed by some overall comments and conclusions arising from this research, also drawing it together with other related research.

### 7.1 Summary of findings

What flexible child care arrangements are families seeking to meet their needs, and are those arrangements currently available?

The varied circumstances of families, even just those included in this research, make answering this question very difficult. Families seek very different care options, depending on their unique combinations of parents’ employment arrangements, family and child characteristics, and access to family or friends as alternate providers of care. Differences in the supply of formal care options that match possible work hours also contribute to there being considerable variation in the extent to which needed flexible care arrangements are available to families.

The variability of types of care used and features of care that are sought highlight that one thing parents do seek in child care is access to a choice of arrangements. That may mean, for example, a choice of different centre-based or FDC providers, or it may mean a choice between a centre-based or family-based provider of care. Certain care types may be preferred during weekday, daytime hours compared to other hours. We saw, for example, that early mornings were difficult for some families, but that did not mean that they all wanted earlier formal care options at this time, given concerns over their children’s wellbeing. We had some parents using informal care at this time, and some expressed a wish for some form of in-home care to cover the early morning hours.

From this research, it is apparent that many parents have in place care arrangements that they do not wish to change, as varied as they are. Nevertheless, there were features of child care that parents sought under the banner of “flexible care” that were not highly accessible. In particular, this related to occasional or variable care, or care for shorter sessions. For some, it related to care during non-standard hours, but this most often meant slightly extended daytime hours.

While we had some parents saying they had an unmet need for overnight care or weekend care, it was also apparent that many parents had found ways to cover care at these times. The trial project that offered weekend care provided an illustration of how families may not take up straightaway a formal care option during non-standard hours if they have other means of caring for children at these times.
Conclusion

Many parents do appear satisfied with their care arrangements, often having adjusted their work hours such that they had some sort of work–care solution. Even among families who rely on only themselves or extended family members to provide care, there are some who would not change their arrangements, despite a sense that they are juggling existing care and work arrangements. This is important to recognise, in planning and implementing formal child care solutions that are expected to meet parents’ needs. As stated by Wheelock and Jones, 2002 (p. 441), “A clear understanding of why working parents use complementary [informal] childcare (particularly from grandparents) is essential for any child care policy that hopes to be attuned to what families actually want”. Informal care solutions were valued by parents, and were often able to meet parents’ needs for flexible care—for care outside of standard hours, or to match variable rosters. While valued, parents nevertheless did not always feel comfortable relying on informal providers of care.

Parents’ demands for particular forms of care varied by age of child, consistent with earlier research (e.g., Boyd, Thorpe, & Tayler, 2010; Johansen et al., 1996; Rose & Elicker, 2008). Increasingly, though, parents value formal centre-based options as children approach school age, and arrangements that matched their demands for flexible care were quite difficult for families to find. Parents in these situations would often combine some centre-based care with informal options.

To say whether flexible care arrangements are available, it is important to recognise that just because a service exists may not mean it is an available option to all families. At one extreme, this was evident here in relation to in-home carers or nannies. While parents in this research seemed to appreciate that such a service exists, they felt that it was not available to them, given constraints of cost. Extending this, we might find that some families feel that centre-based care is not available to them because of financial concerns. Certainly, some parents acknowledged that the option of booking a full-time child care place in order to secure child care for any possible shifts was not a financially viable solution. Some international research has found that low-income families are more constrained in their child care choices, being more likely to look for child care that meets their practical needs, rather than having a primary focus on the quality of care (Peyton et al., 2001). Similarly, other research has found low-income families value high quality care, but select care more for the practical aspects of it rather than its quality (De Marco et al., 2009; Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012). These income-related constraints were not fully explored in this report.

Beyond income, some demographic factors were associated with families not being able to access the flexible care arrangements they sought. Some parents were constrained because of having multiple children, having children with special needs, or living in areas with a lower supply of formal care, for example. Demographic factors such as these are typically associated with families’ use of different care arrangements (e.g., De Marco et al., 2009; Johansen et al., 1996; Tang et al., 2012), possibly reflecting that parents with different characteristics have different choices and constraints in child care options.

Further, some parents felt constrained because they did not have access to informal carers such as grandparents, and single parents did not have the option of sharing the care of children with a resident partner. International research has shown that such informal care arrangements are commonly used by families when parents have non-standard or varying work hours (Bihan & Martin, 2004; Han, 2004; La Valle et al., 2002; Moss et al., 2008; Riley & Glass, 2002), such that when this care is not an available option, finding an appropriate care solution may be especially difficult and stressful.

What are barriers to families accessing different models of flexible care?

The greatest barrier to families in being able to access different models of care was the lack of availability of those options, as we have discussed above. Not only was this about access to child care overall, it was about access to child care with the flexibility that parents sought. As we have reported throughout, parents in the FCCS and the SACS had usually found some way of managing work and family, which involved parent-only care, informal care, formal care or a combination of any of these. The experience of the trials suggests that families are often
reluctant to change arrangements that work, even if such arrangements are challenging to sustain.

Nevertheless, parents, and especially shift-working parents, talked about how their options could be improved, and their inability to access what they wanted (such as occasional care, care that could be booked and/or changed at short notice, or affordable in-home care) usually related to those options simply not being available to them. As noted previously, cost was an additional barrier, especially in thinking about the possibility of in-home or nanny care.

### 7.2 Overall comments and conclusions

Our presentation of this research began with analyses of how parents' views about non-parental care of children, and availability of care options, fed into their decisions about employment. Largely this was related to mothers' employment. In this research, many mothers had reduced their hours at work while children are young for this reason, cutting back on families' potential need for non-parental child care. We used Emlen's (2010) framework to describe how some families had sought or used their flexibility in the workplace in order to address their child care needs. For some, their family situation meant that they could manage their work and care arrangements without non-parental care.

Among the nurses and police, a number of mothers referred to their part-time work arrangement that meant that they could organise their shifts to complement their spouse or partner's shifts, allowing non-parental care to be minimised. Others had some say over their shifts, although these were not necessarily at fixed times, requiring families to juggle multiple or informal arrangements. These parents had varied experiences in their workplace, in being able to access shifts that matched the child care available to them. We similarly heard, from the school-aged care survey (with more diverse occupation coverage) of parents having varied experiences in the workplace, with jobs that involved long hours, long commutes or inflexible scheduling appearing to cause more child care problems than others. While some parents had been able to select into jobs (or job characteristics) that allowed them to work around child care, others had not. In fact, when parents were asked how their child care situations could be improved, some did not refer to a wish for a different child care system, they instead referred to a wish for more flexibility at work.

While we have focused in our research questions on parents' needs for “flexible” child care, “flexibility” was not always the defining characteristic of care that parents sought. Parents had other qualities of care in mind when discussing what they used or what they wanted to use to manage their employment arrangements. The wellbeing of children was a central feature in parents’ decision-making about work and care. As such, parents talked about the potential for care to provide opportunities for children to develop relationships, or develop socially or cognitively. But the practicalities of care arrangements mattered also—in regard to costs and location, for example. Location was a critical factor for parents, in that they seek a certain form of care, usually close to home or work. As discussed by Meyers and Jordan (2006), parents seek a way of meeting their demands of earning and caring that means, in looking for a child care solution, that they sometimes must prioritise practical aspects of a care provider over others. For parents in this research who worked non-standard or variable hours, flexibility was one such practical aspect, in that it had to fit around these hours, but for parents being “flexible” only made sense when other key features such as location also made the care arrangement feasible.

There were various dimensions to “flexibility” that were sought by parents. To some extent, this meant greater availability of existing care arrangements, while some wanted access to options they don't currently see as being available to them, including more occasional care or in-home care, or care at different hours. While some parents expressed a wish for the types or features of care that were explored in the trials, clearly an important question in taking this forward is in regard to the likely take-up of those forms of care. Provision of flexible care by services “just in case” it is needed is not likely to be financially sustainable.

A general comment coming out of this research is that some parents sought more information about the formal care arrangements available to them. The invitations to participate in the FDC trials seem to have alerted some parents to the option of FDC, especially for those returning to work after a period of leave. This highlights the usefulness of distributing information on
different child care options to parents when they are likely to be making decisions about child care. Internationally, it has been observed that parents often do not have complete information about their care options, and some parents may be less equipped than others to find out what options are available to them (Henly, Shaefer, & Waxman, 2006). For example, in low-income areas (in the United States) it has been observed that parents often rely on family, friends and neighbours for information about child care, and yet these people may not have accurate information about potential providers of formal child care in the area (Henly et al., 2006; Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012). Equipping parents with information about possible child care providers may be particularly important for those who need a range of child care options to call upon at short notice; for example, when shifts change, when new employment opportunities arise, or when usual care providers are not available.

This research has provided us with some valuable insights about families’ use of and need for flexible care, and findings align with other research on child care and employment decision-making, and on family approaches to managing non-standard work hours. However, these analyses were not based on a sample that is representative of Australian families. To broaden our understanding further and, in particular, to be able to identify whether there is a demand for particular forms of flexible care within groups of the Australian population, this research needs to be increased in scope to include parents working in other jobs across different areas of the country. Of particular value would be further Australian research that focuses on the work and care options for more vulnerable families; especially, to find out how such families manage the care of children for non-standard and variable work hours.
References


Chapter 8


Given the importance of child care in enabling parents to engage in paid work, an important area of concern has been for those parents who work non-standard or variable work hours, who may have difficulties finding care that supports their work hours. Interest in the extent to which child care is flexible enough to meet such parents’ demands led to the development of the Child Care Flexibility Trials, a project conducted by the Australian government in 2013 and 2014. One of the objectives of these trials was to gain greater understanding about parents’ and service providers’ perspectives on flexible child care. The other main objective was to test a number of approaches to the delivery of flexible child care, with a focus on families whose needs did not fit with standard models of child care delivery. A key aspect of this was to explore the level of demand for greater flexibility and whether this demand could be met in the long term in a sustainable and replicable way.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the trials. The evaluation measured the extent to which the goals and expected outcomes of the trials were achieved, and was based on interviews with and surveys of parents, service providers and other key stakeholders. More information about the components of the trials is presented in Box 1, below, along with key evaluation findings regarding each components’ implementation and outcomes.

The take-up of specific projects in the trials was quite low, but through the evaluation discussions with service providers and parents, and related survey data, helped to provide some explanations of why the take-up was lower than had been expected, and to provide more general information about the challenges and opportunities relating to the demand for and supply of flexible child care.

For more information about evaluation findings, refer to Baxter and Hand (2016).

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**Box 1: Child care flexibility trial projects**

**Flexible care through family day care**

- This trial involved the provision of family day care (FDC), with parents being able to arrange new or changed bookings through a single point of call, with care to be available 24/7, and changeable at short notice. Within each of six sites, it was intended that a team of two or three FDC educators would provide flexible child care to each family by offering weekend, evening and overnight care as well as weekday care during standard working hours.

- In total, 31 families enrolled and received care as part of the trial. The model that was trialled did meet the needs of many families requiring flexible care. In fact, some of the “flexible” features of care being trialled were already being offered by individual

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19 The Child Care Flexibility Trials were announced by the Australian government’s Department of Education and Training (then named the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) in March 2013. The trials concluded in 2014.
educators. FDC was especially valued because it could (often) provide the flexibility required to match parents’ varying work hours, be booked for shorter sessions or paid per hour, and involve care outside of standard hours.

However, access to this model of care was dependent on there being a match of specific educators willing to provide flexible care to families who needed it, at the times they needed it, and in the geographical area they needed. Matching of families to educators within specific locations was problematic. This matching was even difficult for families needing standard hours of care, with educators already at capacity, or unable or unwilling to provide the high degree of flexibility that some parents sought, given the possible effects on their own wellbeing and that of their family.

Extended hours in long day care (two services)

Service 1 aimed to provide participating families with access to extended hours of operation at the start and/or at the end of the weekday at six centres across Australia. Participating centres offered extended early morning sessions (commencing at 5 am at the earliest) and/or extended evening sessions (until 8 pm at the latest). A separate fee was payable for the extended session of care, and parents were required to book this session in advance.

While some centres reported a significant interest in the extended sessions, only one had sufficient permanent enrolments to continue an extended session beyond the trial period. At the end of 2013, three of the centres had no enrolments in the extended hours and as a result the trials at these centres were discontinued early. In total, 18 families were reported to have enrolled in the extended hours sessions over the trial period.

The extended hours were especially helpful to some families, and so in this respect the trial met the needs of these families. However, the low take-up may in part have reflected that the model of delivery (requiring parents to book sessions of care ahead of time and to pay extra for those sessions) did not meet other parents’ needs for flexible care. It may also have been due to a lack of demand at those services.

Service 2 piloted a range of changes to 12 children’s services, including early childhood education and care and OSHC services. Changes included extending care through the New Year period, extending operating hours at eight services, trialling the idea of opening for weekend sessions (this was not pursued, after a survey of parents revealed a lack of demand), reducing the length of notice required for cancellation, and the provision of a number of other new activities within specific services.

There was a strong uptake of the extended hours offered at these services as part of the trials, with numbers building slowly. Accessing extended hours did not require a separate booking or an additional fee. This may have meant that parents were able to make use of the extended hours in a flexible way. Other changes listed above were implemented successfully (such as changing the New Year opening period, and changing cancellation processes), although some tested changes at services (e.g., the provision of take-home meals) did not have sufficient demand and were not expected to continue beyond the trial period.

Weekend centre-based care

This project aimed to meet a perceived community need for weekend and evening child care. The initial scope of the trial was to provide care on weekends (Saturdays and Sundays) at one school-aged care service. The scope was later expanded to include evening care from 6 pm to 10 pm.

While this service was extremely well regarded by parents using it for standard hours care, the take-up of care on weekends and evenings was far lower than had been expected. During the life of the trial, a total of 31 families expressed an interest in
the evening and weekend extended sessions. Of these, six were new families and 25 existing families. The design and delivery of this program certainly appears to have qualities that would be valued by parents seeking care at these hours for school-aged children, so this suggests that use of weekend (and evening) care might be avoided by parents if they have other options available to them. The extended weekday hours and weekend care offered through this project ceased operating at the end of the trial due to insufficient demand.

School holiday care for older children and children with special needs

- At Service 1, the aim was to establish a trial vacation care program tailored towards 11–14 year olds. Much attention was given to the development of an age-appropriate program, finding a suitable location and staffing mix. Community and parent engagement aimed to increase awareness of the program.
- The program ran in four school holiday periods, with a total of 38 children participating, averaging eight children per day. This was lower than needed to be viable, and so the program was downscaled to allow a version of it to continue.
- The data collected in the evaluation (which was limited due to the low take-up) suggested that the program did offer a significant improvement for school holiday care of older children, compared to programs generally designed for a younger age group, and so had the potential to be very helpful as a means of addressing the school holiday care needs of parents of older children.
- At Service 2, the proposal was to deliver vacation care program for children aged 5–12 years old with autism spectrum disorder. The program itself was carefully considered and designed to be as flexible as possible for parents, while taking account of the special needs of the children attending.
- In the holiday period when it was offered, average daily attendance varied between six and 11 children per day. The take-up for this program, however, was lower than needed in order for it to remain financially viable. From the data collected through the evaluation (which was limited due to the low take-up), it appears that parents appreciated the idea of this service, but a major barrier to its use concerned the lack of availability of transport. Cost was also a factor for some.

Outside school hours care projects

- This component involved the planned delivery of 60 action research projects based in OSHC services across Australia. The purpose was to use existing infrastructure and invest in improving the skills and knowledge of educators, to identify opportunities to create more flexible and responsive service provision for the local community. As such, through a “best practice” approach, the trial sought to enhance service delivery, improve accessibility and build capacity within the sector to develop flexible services that are more responsive to the needs of their local community. This trial included funding to engage community coordinators in “high need” communities, to bring together groups of service providers running programs for school-aged children, and to broker activity care packages tailored to the interests of local children.
- There was significant diversity in the types of projects being undertaken by services participating in the action research projects. It was noted by participants that by taking a “community development” approach to these projects, they were more likely to find local answers to local issues. However, the focus of these action research projects seemed to be around discovering more about the issues that the services had set out to explore rather than trialling a new or enhanced service model.
Table B1: Characteristics of participants in the Flexible Child Care Qualitative Study (FCCS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Parents at trial sites (n)</th>
<th>Parents from stakeholder groups (n)</th>
<th>Total (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship status</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family employment status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two parents employed full-time</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One employed full-time, one part-time</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One employed full-time, one not employed or on leave</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent employed full-time</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent employed part-time</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents (or single parent) not employed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental employment arrangements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents (or single parent) employed and working variable shifts that include non-standard hours</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents (or single parent) employed and working set shifts that include non-standard hours</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one parent (or single parent) has work hours within standard work hours</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One parent (or single parent) not employed</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children aged &lt; 14 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three or more</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only children over 14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of youngest child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 1 year</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 years</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–4 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–9 years</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 years or more</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Either (or single) parent speaks a language other than English at home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued on page 81
Appendix B: Sample characteristics

### Table B1: Characteristics of participants in the Flexible Child Care Qualitative Study (FCCS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Parents at trial sites (n)</th>
<th>Parents from stakeholder groups (n)</th>
<th>Total (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of educational attainment of either (or single) parent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12 or below</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate or diploma</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor degree or higher</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation of respondent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager or professional</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community or personal service worker</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse or midwife</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paramedic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technician, trade worker or labourer, clerical, administrative or sales worker</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable/missing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation of partner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager or professional</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community or personal service worker</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse or midwife</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paramedic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technician, trade worker or labourer, clerical, administrative or sales worker</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable/missing (including single parents)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sample</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### Table B2: Characteristics of parent respondents in the School-Aged Care Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender of respondent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>81.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family employment status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two parents employed full-time</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One employed full-time, one part-time</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One employed full-time, one not employed or on leave</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent employed full-time</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent employed part-time</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, some employment</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents (or single parent) not employed</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued on page 82
### Table B2: Characteristics of parent respondents in the School-Aged Care Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of children aged &lt; 14 years (including part-time residents)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three or more</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of youngest child</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–2 years</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–5 years</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–8 years</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9–11 years</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 years or more</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English is the only language spoken in your home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>83.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say/missing</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anyone in the household of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>97.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say/missing</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation of respondent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technician, trade worker or labourer</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community or personal service worker</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical or administrative worker</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales worker</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not applicable/missing</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation of partner</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technician, trade worker</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community or personal service worker</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical or administrative worker</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales worker</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinery operator, driver, labourer</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable/missing (including single parents)</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income before tax (annual)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Up to $65,000</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$65,001–$85,000</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$85,001–$100,000</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,001–$150,000</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$151,001–$200,000</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$200,001 or more</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total sample</strong></td>
<td><strong>319</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages may not add to 100.0% due to rounding.
### Table C1: Standard and non-standard weekday work hours, by occupation and industry, working-aged women, 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation and industry group</th>
<th>Standard hours (7 am to 7 pm) (%)</th>
<th>Non-standard hours</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Sample size (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>104</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>99.2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>320</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technicians and trades workers</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and personal service workers</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>155</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical and administrative workers</td>
<td>98.7</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>359</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sales workers</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>76</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourers and machinery operators and drivers</td>
<td>98.9</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>94</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail trade</td>
<td>97.3</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>104</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation and food services</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>48</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and training</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>180</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care and social assistance</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>234</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other industries</td>
<td>99.4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>604</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All occupations &amp; industries</strong></td>
<td><strong>98.8</strong></td>
<td><strong>8.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>19.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>25.8</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,170</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table includes women aged 25–54 years who were working on the weekday diary day. The 2006 Time Use Survey classified occupations according to ANZSCO 2005 and industries according to ANZSIC 2006. Respondents were asked to indicate all hours that applied. * Estimate with RSE > 25%.

Source: Estimates were derived from ABS 4152.0.55.002 - Microdata: Time Use Survey, Expanded Confidentialised Unit Record File, Australia, 2006.
Table C2: Non-standard and variable work hours, by occupation, employed women, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Works weekends (%)</th>
<th>Work hours vary (%)</th>
<th>Required to be on call or standby (%)</th>
<th>Hours vary or on call (%)</th>
<th>Sample size (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief executives, general managers and legislators a</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers and farm managers</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist managers</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality, retail and service managers</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>2,428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business, human resource and marketing professionals</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design, engineering, science and transport professionals</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education professionals</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health professionals</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal, social and welfare professionals</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other professionals b</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technicians and trades workers</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering, ICT and science technicians</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food trades workers</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other technician and trades workers c</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and personal service workers</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>1,364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and welfare support workers</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carers and aides</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality workers</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>286</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protective service workers</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports and personal service workers</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical and administrative workers</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>2,561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office managers and program administrators</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal assistants and secretaries</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General clerical workers</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry clerks and receptionists</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerical clerks</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>676</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clerical and office support workers</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other clerical and administrative workers</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued on page 85
### Table C2: Non-standard and variable work hours, by occupation, employed women, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Works weekends (%)</th>
<th>Work hours vary (%)</th>
<th>Required to be on call or standby (%)</th>
<th>Hours vary or on call (%)</th>
<th>Sample size (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sales workers</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>1,306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales representatives and agents</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales assistants and salespersons</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales support workers</td>
<td>59.5</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinery operators and drivers</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
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<td>Labourers</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaners and laundry workers</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory process workers</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food preparation assistants</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other labourers</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All employed women</strong></td>
<td><strong>31.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>23.8</strong></td>
<td><strong>20.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>36.4</strong></td>
<td><strong>10,150</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Respondents were asked to indicate all hours that applied. * Includes managers not further defined (NFD). + Includes professionals NFD, arts and media professionals, ICT professionals. ‡ Includes technicians and trades workers NFD, automotive and engineering trades workers, construction trades workers, electro-technology and telecommunications trades workers, skilled animal and horticultural workers and other technicians and trades workers. † Includes labourers NFD, construction and mining labourers, farm, forestry and garden workers. * RSE > 25%.

Source: Estimates were derived from ABS, 6202.0.30.007 - Microdata: Labour Force Survey and Forms of Employment Survey, Basic and Expanded CURF, Australia, November 2008.
Table C3: Non-standard and variable work hours, by industry, employed women, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry group</th>
<th>Works weekends (%)</th>
<th>Work hours vary (%)</th>
<th>Required to be on call or standby (%)</th>
<th>Hours vary or on call (%)</th>
<th>Sample size (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, forestry and fishing</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>12.4 d</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity, gas, water and waste services</td>
<td>6.6 d</td>
<td>13.7 d</td>
<td>10.0 d</td>
<td>18.9 d</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale trade</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail trade</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>1,410</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food retailing</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>41.0</td>
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<td>Other retailing</td>
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<td>26.1</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>797</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retail trade not further defined a</td>
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<td>16.4</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation and food services</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and beverage services</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>688</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport, postal and warehousing</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information, media and telecommunications</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial and insurance services</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rental, hiring and real estate services</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, scientific and technical services</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative and support services</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration and safety</td>
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<td>14.0</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>744</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration</td>
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<td>12.9</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public order, safety and regulatory services, defence</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and training</td>
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<td>19.6</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>1,188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool and school education</td>
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<td>16.5</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary and adult education and training b</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care and social assistance</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>1,849</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hospitals</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical and other health care services c</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential care and social assistance services</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and recreation services</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other services</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All employed</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>10,152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Respondents were asked to indicate all hours that applied. a Includes motor vehicle, parts and fuel retailing. b Includes education and training NFD. c Includes health care and social assistance NFD. d Estimate with RSE > 25%. Source: Estimates were derived from ABS, 6202.0.30.007 - Microdata: Labour Force Survey and Forms of Employment Survey, Basic and Expanded CURF, Australia, November 2008.
### Table C4: Combinations of children’s care arrangements, by child age, 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child age (years)</th>
<th>Parent only (%)</th>
<th>Child care only (%)</th>
<th>Relative only (%)</th>
<th>Relative &amp; child care (%)</th>
<th>Preschool only (%)</th>
<th>Non-relative only (%)</th>
<th>Relative &amp; preschool (%)</th>
<th>Child care &amp; preschool (%)</th>
<th>Other combinations (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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**Note:** See also Figure 1. Child care refers to LDC, FDC, OSHC or other formal care. Relative care is predominantly grandparent care, but includes sibling and non-resident parent care. Preschool refers to formal ECE, generally offered in the year or two before full-time school. Percentages may not add to 100.0% due to rounding.

**Source:** Baxter (2014b); Estimates were derived from 4402.0.55.001 - Microdata: Childhood Education and Care, Australia, June 2011.
### Table C5: Combinations of child care arrangements, by child age group and mothers’ work hours, 2011

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<th>Parent-only (%)</th>
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<th>Relative only (%)</th>
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<th>Preschool only (%)</th>
<th>Non-relative only (%)</th>
<th>Relative &amp; preschool (%)</th>
<th>Child care &amp; preschool (%)</th>
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Note: Numbers for preschool categories only apply to 3–5 year olds. Child care refers to LDC, FDC, OSHC or other formal care. Relative care is predominantly grandparent care, but includes sibling and non-resident parent care. Preschool refers to formal ECE, generally offered in the year or two before full-time school. Percentages may not add to 100.0% due to rounding.

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